STEPHANIA RIBEIRO DO AMARAL CORRÊA

THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT IN OSCAR WILDE'S PLAYS

Tese apresentada para obtenção do título de Doutora em Letras, área de Teoria da Literatura junto ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras do Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas da Universidade Estadual Paulista, Câmpus de São José do Rio Preto.
Área de Concentração: Teoria da Literatura.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Peter James Harris

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For the most beloved ones in my life.

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RESUMO

Esta tese propõe que todas as peças escritas por Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), a saber: *Vera or, The Nihilists* (1880), *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *Salomé* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1894), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) e *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), podem ser analisadas de acordo com a perspectiva teórica de base estética da qual Wilde foi um dos expoentes maiores. O embasamento teórico-crítico de tal análise consiste dos ensaios críticos de Wilde ‗The Truth of Masks' (1885), ‗The Decay of Lying' (1889), ‗Pen, Pencil and Poison' (1889) e ‗The Critic as Artist' (1890), que foram posteriormente compilados em seu livro *Intentions* (1891). O presente estudo tem seus alicerces em minha dissertação de mestrado intitulada *Oscar Wilde:* teoria e prática, defendida em abril de 2011. Nessa dissertação, a peça *The Importance of Being Earnest* foi analisada sob essa mesma ótica e permitiu a compreensão da coerência entre a teoria e a prática de Oscar Wilde, uma vez que, nos resultados que foram obtidos, pode-se perceber que os elementos estruturais da peça, bem como seus elementos linguísticos, contêm veios estéticos profundos. Dessa maneira, o trabalho aqui desenvolvido averigua se a transposição da teoria em prática se dá em toda a composição dramática de Wilde ou se *The Importance of Being Earnest* é apenas um caso específico e isolado. Uma vez provada que a coerência wildeana se mantém, foi instaurado, então, um questionamento sobre a medida em que sua composição dramática está associada às suas próprias ponderações estéticas.

Palavras-chave: Oscar Wilde; Teatro; Movimento Estético.

ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis proposes that all the plays written by Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900), namely *Vera or, The Nihilists* (1880), *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *Salomé* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1894), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), can be analysed according to the aesthetic theoretical perspective of which Wilde was one of the major exponents. The theoretical basis for the analysis is to be found in Wilde's critical essays, "The Truth of Masks' (1885), "The Decay of Lying' (1889), "Pen, Pencil and Poison' (1889) and "The Critic as Artist' (1890), which were later published in *Intentions* (1891). The present study has its foundations in my MA dissertation, *Oscar Wilde:* teoria e prática, concluded in April 2011. In that work, Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was analysed from the same perspective, which made it possible to perceive the consistency between Oscar Wilde's theory and practice, as the results proved that both the structural and the linguistic elements of the play contain deep aesthetic features. The work developed here is thus intended to verify whether the transposition from theory to practice occurs in Wilde's dramatic work as a whole, or whether *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a specific and isolated case. Since it was possible to demonstrate that Wilde's plays are indeed consistent with his aesthetic principles, the study goes on to investigate the extent to which his dramatic composition may be associated with his own aesthetic precepts.

Key-words: Oscar Wilde; Theatre; Aestheticism.

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1. Introduction

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on 16 October 1854, in Dublin, Ireland, the second of three children born to Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee (1821-1896) and Sir William Robert Wills Wilde (1815-1876). Wilde's mother was a prominent poet and nationalist; his father a successful ear and eye surgeon and noted philanthropist, knighted in 1864.

After his initial years of schooling at home, Wilde attended the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, where he studied the classics. In 1871 he entered Trinity College, Dublin, then went on to study the classics at Magdalen College, Oxford, England from 1874 to 1878. It was there that he came under the influence of writer and critic Walter Pater (1839-1894) and helped found the Aesthetic Movement. While in college, Wilde excelled in his studies, winning many prizes and awards, including Oxford's Newdigate Prize for his poem, „Ravenna" (1878).

In the 1880s Wilde wrote his first two plays, the tragedies *Vera, or the Nihilists* (1880) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883). As it was the case with *Salomé*, which would appear almost ten years later, in 1891, Wilde's tragedies were not immediately brought to stage, and their first public performances happened outside Great Britain.

In 1890, Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which appeared as a complete story in the July 1890 issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* and was republished as a book a year later. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* served as a kind of laboratory for Wilde's aesthetic ideas to be put into practice, mainly due to the fact that the Preface of the book, which was added to it when it was republished in 1891, was signed by one of the main characters, the artist Basil Hallward. In the Preface, Wilde exposes, through the figure of Basil Hallward, his aesthetic philosophy in a sort of manifesto of the purpose of art.

In the following years, Wilde turned to writing comedies, and his first work of the genre, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, opened in February 1892. Its financial and critical success prompted Wilde to continue to write for the theatre. His subsequent plays included *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These comedies were all highly acclaimed, mainly by the public, and firmly established Wilde as a playwright.

Wilde's successful dramaturgical career was prematurely interrupted by his trial and conviction for homosexuality in 1895, weeks after the première of his masterpiece,

The Importance of Being Earnest. After his release from prison, Wilde spent his last years exiled in France until his death in Paris in 1900.

Wilde‘s enduring importance and wide-ranging appeal owe much to the events that occurred in his personal life. However, it is the high quality of his works that has always inspired me to deepen my knowledge in the field of his dramatic oeuvre. Wilde‘s refined irony and his devotion to beauty have fascinated me ever since I was still an undergraduate student. Wilde‘s comedies show how accomplished he was in mocking the very society he wished to be part of. As an Irish playwright, he was and remained an outsider, even if he was able to completely dominate London society. In the end, the morals of English society crushed Wilde, but his works remain as a sign that his sarcastic laugh will echo for perpetuity. More than one hundred years after his death, Wilde‘s influence remains unaffected, for he is still able to captivate the audience, just as he did when he was alive.

In fact, the current status achieved by Wilde is due to a revaluation his oeuvre has received since the 1970s, for Wilde‘s works have been widely examined over the past fifty years. Before this period, critics tended to ignore the quality of his work, regarding it as immoral, shallow and frivolous. Similarly, his critical writings were considered derivative of Pater‘s and Ruskin‘s, and he was referred to as their _disciple‘ rather than an exponent of Aestheticism in his own right.

According to some critics, Wilde‘s works were only revisited after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in England in 1967. In fact, until this period, criticism was primarily based on Wilde‘s biographies instead of his texts. Therefore, most of the analyses made until that period either embraced the social historical view or tended towards gay culture. From 1970 onwards, these lines of analysis did not disappear, but they ceased to exist to the detriment of Wilde‘s literary works.

New lines of analysis emerged within the scope of gender studies, textual scholarship, women‘s studies and theatre history in the 1980s. There was also a reappraisal of literary history, for Wilde‘s use of textual devices in his dramatic works were identified with intertextuality, mainly due to the fact that his works are related in a dialogical perspective to the ideas he borrowed from several writers and philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, John Keats, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, among others. As a result, Wilde‘s critical essays also started to be regarded as an anticipation of modernism, for it is consistent with a _deconstructive view that the texts‘ irreducible plurality of meanings is derived from

their cross-references, associations, and contiguities‘ (PESTKA, 1999, p. 10). In the 1990s, new paradigms appeared and Wilde‘s Irishness as well as his relation to consumerism became themes for new studies. In the same period, the advent of queer theory also added a new light to the interpretation of his works. Nowadays there are several other tendencies in the analysis of Wilde‘s oeuvre, such as humanism and cosmopolitanism. The cultivation of personality and the multitude of identities are also themes approached by reviewers. In fact, critics acknowledge the value of his entire production, regardless of the critical theory that substantiates these studies. Wilde‘s texts, whether they are poems, essays, plays, short stories or novel, may be considered even more creative for they are broad enough to sustain several layers of interpretation.

In *Oscar Wilde Revalued* (1993) and *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research* (2000), Ian Small reviews critical works produced from Wilde‘s death to the final years of the twentieth century. From his critical panorama it is possible to examine the most recurrent studies of Wilde‘s oeuvre in order to consider which fields are still lacking deeper analysis.

According to Small, from the 1980s onwards, Wilde‘s dramatic works were the principal focus of criticism, especially regarding issues such as genre definition, Wilde‘s masking, European influence, Irish context, and his manipulation of the audience. Individual studies concerning the plays are plentiful, in the case of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but largely lacking with regard to *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*.

In relation to Wilde‘s critical writings, Small points out that they have been studied according to two lines of interpretation: the first one compares Wilde‘s critical writings to traditional Victorian criticism, and the second one privileges Wilde as a predecessor for modernist thinkers. It seems that critics do not notice that these two lines are not mutually exclusive: Wilde is advantageously positioned between the end of a long romantic tradition and the beginning of modernism. Therefore not only does he establish his writings in relation to his precursors, but he also anticipates modernism, predominantly through the division he makes between aesthetics and ethics.

Regardless of the reassessment Oscar Wilde‘s works have received, a comparison between Wilde‘s aesthetic precepts and his own dramatic works as a whole has not yet been undertaken. This, then, is the main objective of the present doctoral thesis: to analyse all the plays written by Oscar Wilde, namely, *Vera, or The Nihilists* (1880), *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1891), *Salome* (1891),

A Woman of No Importance (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), considering the relation between them and Wilde‘s critical essays, in order to verify whether Wilde‘s dramatic writings follow his own aesthetic theoretical perspective.

Oscar Wilde‘s aesthetic theory is used to provide the basis for the interpretation and analysis of his plays. It should be clarified that, out of the many essays written by Wilde, the ones chosen, specifically _The Truth of Masks‘, _Pen, Pencil and Poison‘, _The Decay of Lying‘ and _The Critic as Artist‘, collected in *Intentions*, first published in 1891, are considered the clearest statement of his critical standpoint.

Considering that Walter Pater (1839 – 1894) was, along with Oscar Wilde, a founder of the Aesthetic Movement, some of his works are also analysed to allow a deeper understanding of the precepts of this artistic and philosophical movement. Pater‘s preface to *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1889) and his introduction and conclusion to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) are compared to Wilde‘s essays.

So far as Wilde‘s aestheticism is concerned, he created his own version of aesthetic theory, using the works of his precursors as a starting point to develop his ideas in different directions. As Wilde is said to have based his works on varied sources, not only does he personalise the aesthetic ideas he works with, but also he enlarges them, creating a new aesthetics. Hence, his aesthetic theory consists of more than one aesthetic concept: rather than a single perception of the Aesthetic Movement, Wilde elaborates multiple aesthetics. As a result, his works nowadays feed diverse critical approaches, such as modernism, postmodernism, postimpressionism, dialogism, deconstruction, post-structuralism and many others, as Allison Pease points out in an essay entitled _Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory‘, collected in *Oscar Wilde Studies* (2004). It is therefore intended that the comprehension of the incidence of what will be henceforth referred to as Wilde‘s *aesthetic theories* in his dramatic works may enhance the possibilities for several interpretative analyses of Wilde‘s plays.

Even with the contribution of all the precursors to the Aesthetic Movement, the foundation and consolidation of Aestheticism was made possible due to Walter Pater‘s and Oscar Wilde‘s writings. As aesthetes, they took the legacy of their predecessors to an extreme. For this reason, the present study will be based on an analysis of theoretical and critical works by these two authors, focusing on their original research as laying the

foundations for perpetuating the separation between aesthetics and ethics, instead of verifying the direct sources of their predecessors.

This work has its foundations grounded in my MA dissertation, entitled *Oscar Wilde:* Theory and Practice,[1] which was concluded in March 2011. In that study, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's best known play, was analysed according to Wilde's aesthetic theory. A comparison between Wilde's aesthetics and the play was carried out, having as its basis the aesthetic conception of art, according to which the value of art is intrinsic, for it is constituted in its beauty and cannot be judged by moral, didactic or utilitarian functions. The dissertation demonstrated the consistency between Wilde's Aestheticism and the text of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for both the structural and linguistic elements of the play present aesthetic fundamentals.

Taking the results obtained in the master's dissertation as a premise, it was decided to examine whether the implementation of theory into practice happens in Wilde's dramatic oeuvre as a whole, or whether *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a specific and isolated case.

One of the purposes of including Wilde's first two dramatic pieces, that is, *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*, in the present study is to demonstrate that, even though they were the author's first experiments in the field of theatre, they already carried some of Wilde's trademarks and they can be seen as forerunners of what was yet to come.

The aim of the present study is therefore to examine all Oscar Wilde's plays, focusing the analysis on the procedures and possible transformations that occur in the use of his aesthetic theories in the dramatic texts. In order to achieve this general goal, it is necessary to accomplish certain specific objectives.

The first specific purpose is to highlight the most relevant points in Oscar Wilde's theoretical production through a summary of his critical essays. It is essential to emphasise the importance of Aestheticism within the Anglo-Irish drama of the nineteenth century, considering the participation of Wilde in the consolidation of this movement and his beliefs in aesthetic principles. The next aim is to present each of Wilde's plays in turn, concentrating attention on the structural and linguistic elements which are richest in aesthetic constituents. The final objective is to demonstrate to what extent Wilde's plays correspond to his aesthetic theories.

[1] In the original text: *Oscar Wilde:* teoria e prática.

Of all Wilde‘s contributions to literature and the arts, his main legacy was the effective separation between aesthetics and ethics: through this, there was a fundamental change regarding the way works of art were analysed. Morality and utility are no longer considered valid criteria with which to judge the artistic qualities of any creative work, and the contemporary view of art owes that to Wilde.

Obviously, Wilde was a key figure in the culmination of a process which had started much before, and the division he established in „The Critic as Artist“ was only possible because of a series of facts that led to the questioning of art criticism supported by moralistic views. Indeed, Wilde‘s works were created in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when there was a growth in the publishing industry, which subsequently led to the raise of the mass culture and journalism. In order to facilitate the publication of their works, writers needed to produce in an accelerated rhythm, so that they could meet the market‘s demand. Artists started questioning this practice, and their concern was in conformity with the views of Aestheticism, for the new movement was in favour of art which was not to be defined by usefulness or didacticism, but which would be valued for its beauty, instead.

The Aesthetic Movement was not actually an organised movement as such. It was rather a consonance in the ideas of several writers, artists and philosophers, who united against utilitarianism and were supportive of a concept of art defined by beauty rather than morals or didacticism. The Aesthetes‘ motto was „art for art‘s sake“, that is, art should be valued for itself, for its beauty and the sensations beauty could provoke in the spectators and readers.

Given the circumstances, Wilde‘s concepts were likely to be accepted, were it not for his lateness in adding his own criticism to the Aesthetic Movement. Although Wilde quickly joined in spreading Aestheticism‘s ideas, from the period when Pater‘s book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was published, in 1873, to the publication of his own book on the topic, *Intentions*, in 1891, almost twenty years had passed, which led some critics to regard him as unoriginal.

In fact, Wilde‘s first contact with the Aesthetic Movement came while he was still at Trinity College, Dublin, through his readings of Pater. Pater published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873, renamed in the second and later editions as *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, which is considered to be the bible of Aestheticism. In its preface, Pater ponders over the value of art for its own sake, and he adds considerations about the importance of reflecting on the reduction of experiences

to a group of subjective impressions of the literary artist. Pater believes that the qualities of soul and mind, which are used to construct the literary text, find their architecture in the structure of human life. His advocacy of a subjective and reflexive art resembles Wilde‘s considerations in ‗The Critic as Artist‘, since, in this essay, Wilde would claim that there is no art without self-awareness, and this consciousness is the critical and reflexive spirit.

In 1874, when Wilde started to study at Magdalen College in Oxford, he contacted John Ruskin, and attended Ruskin‘s series of eight lectures whose theme was *The Aesthetic and Mathematic Schools of Art in Florence* (1874), republished as part of *The Works of John Ruskin* (2009), which also helped to establish his thoughts on Aestheticism.

Wilde would only meet Walter Pater in his third year at Oxford, when the latter became his tutor. Pater, in his turn, would not publish another key book on Aestheticism until 1889, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*. Among his essential thoughts, Pater states that the artist‘s purpose is his sense of the world, and a work of art is created in proportion to the truth of this sense. Therefore, all beauty in a work of art lies in its truth. Pater also reflects on the singularity of beauty and asserts that art has nothing to do with morals, but with beauty.

After graduating from Oxford, Wilde moved to London and was invited to lecture on Aestheticism in the United States and Canada in 1882. In fact, the invitation not only was to familiarise the North American public with the English artistic movement, but also to disseminate Gilbert and Sullivan‘s comic opera *Patience* (1881), which caricatured the Aesthetic Movement. In fact, Aestheticism, in addition to claiming the superiority of art over morals, also endorsed the view that art should bring beauty to the dull daily life, through decorative arts, interior design and attire. This branch of Aestheticism was considered empty and self-indulgent and it was frequently mocked in the satirical magazine *Punch*, which rendered the artistic movement both popular and futile. Because of that, in England, *Patience* became a hit: it ran for a total of 578 performances, which encouraged its producer, Richard D‘Oyly Carte, to produce it in the United States, six months after the London premiere. As Wilde embodied the precepts of Aestheticism, even in his way of dressing and talking, his lectures would serve to spread the ideas ridiculed in the play. Therefore, the ideas Wilde helped to establish were the same he helped to mock, and he seemed not to take himself so seriously as not to accept such an invitation. The game between seriousness and

triviality which started to be outlined in this aesthetic tour would be manifested throughout his comic works, and it would culminate in his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in 1895.

Upon returning from North America, Wilde spent the 1880s writing several fairy tales, critical essays and his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1889). The aesthetic ideas which he had lectured about were set out in a series of articles published in literary-intellectual journals, and, in 1885, his essay ‗The Truth of Masks' was published under the title ‗Shakespeare and Stage Costume' in *The Nineteenth Century*. In this essay, Wilde addresses the importance of costume to the creation of effect in theatrical performances. His arguments are so bound to each other that he is able to prove to his readers that the perfect composition of details is necessary to the creation of effective illusion, which brings life to the theatre. Nonetheless, the most important aesthetic perception in this essay occurs in the last paragraph, which was added when the article was republished in *Intentions*. In this paragraph, Wilde asserts that there is not a universal truth in art, and truth is seen as contradictory, for in Wilde's view, opposites can only be understood together.

Wilde's second essay on Aestheticism, ‗The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue', appeared in the January 1889 issue of *The Nineteenth Century*. The essay is presented as a Socratic dialogue between the characters Cyril and Vivian, and the discussion begins when Vivian tells Cyril about an article he is writing entitled ‗The Decay of Lying: A Protest'. In the article, Vivian defends the aesthetic doctrine and art for its own sake. In fact, four doctrines are stated in the article: the first one is that art never expresses anything but itself; the second doctrine is that the return of art to life and nature makes art imperfect; in the third doctrine it is stated that life imitates art more than art imitates life; and finally, the fourth doctrine says that the very purpose of art is to tell beautiful lies. The principles of the Aesthetic Movement are manifest through this essay, for the first doctrine contains the core of Aestheticism: the end of art is self-expression and its value is intrinsic.

In 1889, in the January issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, Wilde published ‗Pen, Pencil and Poison'. In this essay, Wilde deals with the life and works of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a writer and notorious poisoner. The most important aesthetic assertion in this essay is that art is not related to ethical virtues. According to Wilde, the fact that Wainewright was a poisoner does not compute as a negative point in the evaluation of his prose, since art is not about moral approval or disapproval. Although

the essay may be read as ironic, it still cannot be said that Wilde defends morality. If the text is seen as sarcastic, one might glimpse that Wilde believes art should not be associated with morals, but that immorality is not a valid criterion of judgment of a work of art either. Beauty is the only criterion any critic should use in judging a work of art.

The first and second parts of ‗The Critic as Artist' appeared in the July and September 1890 issues of *The Nineteenth Century*, respectively. Similar to ‗The Decay of Lying', ‗The Critic as Artist' is a dialogue between two characters, Gilbert and Ernest. Through the first character Wilde argues about the importance of both the critical faculty and artistic creation, because, for him, the artist must be critical and creative if he wants to produce great works of art. Moreover, Wilde argues that criticism should be as creative as the work produced by the literary writer, because there is no great art without self-consciousness, and Wilde identifies self-consciousness with the critical spirit. The critical work is thus seen as being superior to the work of the artist, in the same way that, for Wilde, criticism unifies all forms of art. Wilde also discusses the separation between art and morals: he claims that aesthetics surpasses ethics, since beauty is superior to everything. Nevertheless, Wilde clarifies that aesthetics, even being considered higher than ethics, does not replace it: both concepts participate in completely different areas. Therefore, Wilde's article contributes to perpetuate the separation between art and ethics, which was undoubtedly the greatest contribution of the Aesthetic Movement to art.

Convinced that he could produce his own version of aesthetic ideas, Wilde published the precepts of Aestheticism according to his personal view of it. He discussed not only questions of beauty in art, artistic self-expression and art criticism, but also philosophical concepts in binary opposition such as ‗truth versus lie', ‗universal versus individual' and ‗æsthetics versus ethics'. Published together in *Intentions* in 1891, these essays may be regarded as Wilde's own aesthetic theories.

Meanwhile Oscar Wilde started to establish himself as a playwright in the 1880s. He wrote his first play, the tragedy *Vera, or The Nihilists*, in 1880. The four-act play tells the story of the title-character, the top assassin of the Russian terrorist group of Nihilists, who swears never to love in order to make the group's ideology her primary concern in life. However, she falls in love with the heir to the Russian throne, Alexis, who she is supposed to kill in order to prove her fidelity to the Nihilist movement. Torn between her affection and her beliefs, Vera decides to kill herself

instead. *Vera* was not immediately staged, and its premiere only took place in the United States three years after it had been written.

Wilde then wrote *The Duchess of Padua*, which was published in 1883. It is Wilde‘s only play written in blank verse and it is also presented in four acts. The plot revolves around Guido Ferranti and Beatrice, the Duchess of the play‘s title. At the beginning of the play, Guido is told that his father was betrayed and killed by the Duke of Padua. Count Moranzone, the man who tells Guido this story, advises him to become the Duke‘s best friend, so that he can get close enough to revenge his father‘s death. Following the Count‘s recommendations, Guido infiltrates the Duke‘s palace, where he meets the Duke‘s wife, Beatrice, with whom he falls in love passionately. As Guido does not want to blemish his pure love for her, he gives up his initial plans. However, the Duchess, determined to remove the only barrier between her and Guido, kills her own husband. Guido, astonished by her attitude, rejects her. Beatrice, in revenge, accuses him of having killed the Duke. Guido is brought before the court and is sentenced to death. The Duchess repents of her decisions and goes to Guido‘s cell, where she drinks some poison and kills herself. Guido also kills himself by using the dagger Beatrice had brought to the cell. Similarly to what happened to *Vera, or The Nihilists*, due to a lack of interest in producing *The Duchess of Padua*, the play‘s premiere only happened in New York in 1891, where it ran for just three weeks.

After an interval of almost a decade, Wilde wrote his last tragedy, *Salome*, in 1891. *Salome* was produced for the first time in Paris in 1896, when Wilde was imprisoned, the text being the only one he wrote in French. Three years later, a translation into English was published. *Salome* is Wilde‘s own version of the biblical passage in which King Herod‘s stepdaughter dances for him in exchange for the head of John the Baptist. In Wilde‘s play, Salome longs for Iokanaan – the Greek name of John the Baptist – and wishes to kiss him. As he rejects her, she takes her revenge by asking the tetrarch for Iokanaan‘s head, so that she will be able to kiss him after his death. Faced with such a terrible scene, Herod orders his soldiers to kill Salome. The play was banned from London‘s stages because it depicts biblical characters, which was forbidden when Wilde wrote it, and *Salome*‘s first performance in England only happened in 1931.

With his three tragedies, Wilde‘s dramatic career did not achieve immediate popularity. However, he became a successful dramatist with the advent of his comedies. In 1892, Wilde‘s first comedy, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, was produced and it became

Wilde‘s first play to be widely accepted and admired. Its plot revolves around a secret from the past: Mrs Erlynne, a woman who once abandoned her husband and child for another man, is Lady Windermere‘s mother. In order to protect his wife from a scandal, Lord Windermere gives Mrs Erlynne large sums of money, which triggers Lady Windermere‘s suspicion that Mrs Erlynne is Lord Windermere‘s lover. Without knowing the truth, Lady Windermere decides to abandon her husband to join Lord Darlington. The only one who knows Lady Windermere‘s plans is Mrs Erlynne, who interferes to save her daughter‘s marriage. *Lady Windermere’s Fan* premiered in London in 1892 and was an outstanding popular success.

Two years later, in 1894, Wilde produced *A Woman of No Importance*, another remarkable triumph of popularity. The audience was captivated both by the plot and the characters‘ comments, which were ironically funny. The play tells the story of Mrs Arbuthnot‘s secret: she has a son, whose father is Lord Illingworth, a bachelor. The plot unfolds due to the fact that Lord Illingworth wants to hire Gerald Arbuthnot to work as his secretary, without knowing that the young man is his son. As Gerald is very naïve and extremely moralistic, he highly admires Lord Illingworth and accepts his invitation to follow him to Vienna, where Lord Illingworth is going to be an ambassador. However, Mrs Arbuthnot does not agree that Gerald should follow his own father, a man who made her suffer so much in the past, and tells him her secret. Gerald then forgives Mrs Arbuthnot for being an unmarried mother, and decides to remain by her side. This gesture reveals his loyalty to the most important woman in his life. Through Mrs Arbuthnot‘s confession, Wilde is able to make the spectators sympathise with her situation, and forgive her by softening their strict moral sense. The first performance of *A Woman of No Importance* was a huge success, which led to its production in the United States.

In the following year, 1895, Wilde consolidated his reputation with the debut of two plays within an interval of only one month. *An Ideal Husband* premiered on 3 January 1895 and was followed by *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which was performed for the first time on 14 February 1895.

The plot of *An Ideal Husband* tells the story of the Chilterns, a couple composed of a modern feminist woman engaged with the social causes of her time and a politician whose career has always been based on the highest ethical and moral values. The complications begin when Mrs Cheveley, an acquaintance of Sir Robert Chiltern, appears to blackmail him, asking for money in exchange for keeping a sordid secret of

his past. The secret Mrs Cheveley holds can ruin not only Sir Robert Chiltern‘s career but also his marriage, because Lady Chiltern believes that she has married the ideal man. Lord Goring interferes to save both the Chilterns‘ marriage as well as Sir Robert Chiltern‘s political career. *An Ideal Husband* was so well received by the public that it ran for 124 performances.

The Importance of Being Earnest is about two friends, John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, who keep double secret identities: John assumes the identity of his imaginary brother Ernest Worthing, and Algernon pretends to be his invented friend, the invalid Bunbury. The play presents a series of hilarious situations due to John and Algernon‘s interest in girls whose desire is to marry a man named Ernest. In the end, they find out that John is actually Algernon‘s older brother and, being the eldest son, he inherited his father‘s name, which was indeed Ernest. Therefore all conflicts are resolved, and the two couples get together. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is considered Wilde‘s masterpiece, and it was acclaimed by the audience as a resounding success. Since its first performance, it has been produced at least once in every three years both in London and Dublin[2].

With both *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* running at the same time, Wilde attained the summit in his dramatist career. Nonetheless, the rise in his professional career was immediately followed by a fall in his personal life, for he decided to sue the Marquess of Queensberry for libel, after the latter accused him of sodomy. In order to confirm that Wilde was really a homosexual, the Marquess hired detectives who found plenty of evidence against the Irish writer. When the trial opened on 3 April 1895, Wilde‘s case reversed against him, as it was proved he had indeed been practicing acts of gross indecency, for which he was sentenced to two years‘ hard labour. Soon after Wilde‘s conviction, the runs of both *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* were suspended and the tour of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in the United States was cancelled. While in prison, Wilde wrote a poem, *The Ballad of Redding Gaol* and a long letter which was later published under the title *De Profundis*. After leaving prison, he spent his last years wandering Europe and wrote nothing further.

[2] The second production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was staged in London in January 1902. From then until February 2010, there were a total of 41 new productions (including adaptations or plays inspired by Wilde‘s one) in 108 years, one production every 2.6 years. However, from 2000 onwards, the frequency has increased and the play has been performed once a year (HARRIS, 2011).

Although Wilde did not write anything else after leaving prison, he is said to have been met by a Mrs Leverson, who returned to him the manuscript of a play, entitled *La Sainte Courtisane*, which Wilde had left unfinished. Actually, Mrs Leverson had been entrusted with the manuscript of the play at the time of Wilde's trial, for Wilde had begun working on the play in 1894, but did not complete it before his imprisonment. The fragments were first published in 1908 in *Methuen's Collected Works*, along with an introduction by Robert Ross, who said that Wilde had intentionally left the manuscript in a cab after recovering it, and all Ross's attempts to recover the lost work had failed. *La Sainte Courtisane* has never been performed and it has been little studied, mainly due to the lack of essential elements that characterise a complete play, such as the unfinished plot, which makes the play incomplete in terms of narrative.

Wilde had also started writing *A Florentine Tragedy* before his imprisonment, but he never completed it. It is not clear the precise date when Wilde wrote this fragment, although some critics assume it was in 1894. In Richard Ellman's biography, the author mentions that Wilde started writing *A Florentine Tragedy* in the same months he was finishing *An Ideal Husband*. The fragments of *A Florentine Tragedy* were found by Robert Ross only after Wilde's death. After some time, however, Ross received a letter from Mr Willard, who said he possessed a typewritten fragment of a play which Wilde had submitted to him. Mr Willard kindly forwarded the fragment for Ross's inspection, and the latter finally assumed that Wilde never wrote the opening scene of this play, for Mr Willard's version began at the same point Ross's did. Sometime afterwards, the Literary Theatre Society solicited of Ross a short drama by Wilde and he offered them the fragment of text of *A Florentine Tragedy*. In his preface to the published text, Robert Ross states that Mr Thomas Sturge Moore was a member of the committee of the Literary Theatre Society and he had been entrusted with the task of writing an opening scene for the fragment. After Moore had written the opening scene, the play premiered in 1906. However, it is not known whether other revivals have happened since then. Regardless of the fact that it was not finished by Wilde, the most important aspect is that the play is virtually finished: although there is not a clear beginning, the drama is complete in terms of narrative. Nevertheless, *A Florentine Tragedy* has received almost no attention from the critics.

The fragments of *A Florentine Tragedy* and *La Sainte Courtisane* will not be included as part of the corpus of the present study, due to the fact that they were left

unfinished by Wilde. Therefore, they are not considered as productive elements for analysis, for both are short of several aspects of a dramatic work.

Each of the works presented above is part of the corpus of the research, which is going to be carried analogically, based on a comparison between Oscar Wilde‘s aesthetic theories and his dramatic works as a whole. For the purpose of showing these similarities, the study proceeds from the general to the specific, that is, from the concepts of Aestheticism to Wilde‘s own aesthetic notions, so that it will be made clear that Wilde‘s essays lend themselves as a theoretical approach. Critical studies about the essays and the plays are also going to be addressed, for several of the criticisms regarding his works present some contribution to the purposes of this research.

Actually, at the time when they were staged, Wilde‘s comedies were not recognised as works of art by the critics, despite the fact that they were huge popular successes. Most critics only referred to the difficulty in classifying the plays according to a defined genre, for Wilde is said to have used different sources in terms of style and form in the construction of his comedies.

Some critics have claimed his plays followed the model of the ‗well-made play‘, which is a dramatic genre from the nineteenth-century theatre created by the French dramatists Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou. It is a model of play construction that involves a tight plot and a climax that happens very close to the end of the action, and it has as a recurrent device the use of letters falling into unintended hands, which bring about plot twists. This particular device of the well-made play may be observed in *An Ideal Husband*, where there are two compromising letters in the hands of the villain, Mrs Cheveley.

The comedy of manners, another dramatic genre pointed out by critics as a model for Wilde‘s plays, was popularised in England by William Congreve (1670 – 1729) in the late eighteenth century. It satirises the manners and affectations of a social class, often represented by stereotypical characters. The plot of the comedy, often concerned with scandal, is generally less important than its witty dialogue. All Wilde‘s comedies present characteristics of the comedy of manners, for their characters are representative of Victorian society. In Wilde‘s comedies, the type of character ‗woman with a past‘ is a recurrent one, and it is represented by Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Mrs Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband* and Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Furthermore, the witty

dialogue is sometimes privileged to the detriment of the plot, as it happens in *A Woman of No Importance*, whose first act is constituted of dialogue rather than action.

Critics also observe that Wilde‘s plays are farces. A farce is a comedy that aims at entertaining the audience through situations that are highly exaggerated, extravagant, and thus improbable. Best exemplified by the work of the French dramatist, Georges Feydeau (1862 – 1921), farces are often highly incomprehensible plot-wise, due to the many plot twists and random events that occur. A farce is also characterised by physical humour, the use of deliberate absurdity or nonsense, and broadly stylised performances. Wilde‘s *The Importance of Being Earnest* may be classified as a farce, since there are so many complications in the plot that it is sometimes even difficult for the spectator to follow it. Absurdities happen mainly in the dialogues between Algernon and Jack, for Algernon is able to convince Jack through his nonsense speech.

Satire is also indicated as a genre in which Wilde chose to work in his plays. It is a broad literary genre which is more often associated with the written word than the theatre. Satire is usually meant to be humorous, although its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society. The subtext in all Wilde‘s comedies presents satirical characteristics, for linguistic resources, such as wit, epigram and irony are used as a means of criticism.

Wilde‘s plays combine features of each of the categories mentioned by the critics, which makes his plays unique and innovative when it comes to the treatment of genre. Nonetheless, with the revaluation of Wilde‘s dramatic works, and the rise of different theoretical perspectives, the discussion about stylistic features became secondary.

There are some referential studies regarding Wilde‘s society dramas which cannot be disregarded, for they present interesting comments related to the plays. One of the first books reviewing Wilde‘s life and works, published twelve years after his death, is Arthur Ransome‘s *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912). Ransome makes some remarkable comments on Wilde‘s works, although his major objective is to trace a portrait of Wilde both as an artist and as a man.

Harold Bloom‘s book *Oscar Wilde* (1985) is a collection of essays written by varied critics. One of the most interesting is Epifanio San Juan Junior‘s, entitled ‗The Action of the Comedies‘, in which San Juan tackles the witty utterances as well as the ironic qualifications in three of Wilde‘s comedies: *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman*

of No Importance and *An Ideal Husband*. Although his aim is to trace the continuity of meaning in terms of thematic pattern, some of his remarks are of particular relevance to the present study, for they have interesting implications referring to the texts of Wilde‘s comedies.

In 1995, Peter Raby published a book specifically on Wilde‘s masterpiece: *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Reader's Companion*. His comments on the play are valuable because he provides a literary and historical context as well as a structured analysis of Wilde‘s last comedy.

In Jonathan Freedman‘s book, *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1998), there are essays on three major topics: Wilde‘s critical works, Wilde‘s drama and Wilde‘s novel *Dorian Gray*. Most of the essays on Wilde‘s dramatic works are focused on *The Importance of Being Earnest*: Katherine Worth‘s essay, entitled ‗*The Importance of Being Earnest*‘, Joseph Loewenstein‘s ‗Wilde and the Evasion of Principle‘ and Joel Fineman‘s ‗The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*‘ are significant due to the fact that each of them presents a different perspective of the play, enriching the possibilities of readings of Wilde‘s masterpiece.

Anne Varty‘s *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (1998) is another key book on Wilde‘s works, for she provides a context of Wilde‘s life as well as analyses of his non-fictional and artistic oeuvre, and her remarks on his aesthetic writings and plays are useful since she considers the sources of Wilde‘s talent.

Another significant study is Peter Raby‘s book on Wilde‘s works entitled *Oscar Wilde* (1988), in which he examines the relationship between Wilde‘s life and his art. In his coverage of Wilde‘s oeuvre, Raby leaves aside two tragedies: *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua.* Nevertheless, his comments on the other plays are really useful for they elucidate some fundamental structural and linguistic aspects. Raby also addresses the issue of Aestheticism and his book may also be regarded as an important source of information in relation to this artistic movement.

In common with Peter Raby, many critics have ignored Wilde‘s first tragedies, and there has been no exploration of either of them in depth. In fact, there has been no reassessment in criticism in relation to these plays, for, when Wilde‘s tragedies were published, several critics regarded them as melodramas, since they were considered to have exaggerated plots, stereotyped characters and interpersonal conflicts that appealed to the emotions.

On the other hand, *Salome* has always attracted critical attention, and it still arouses the interest of actors and directors, for a new production in London‘s West End is said to be scheduled for 2016, with Al Pacino in the role of King Herod, according to information provided by Oliver Mitford in an essay to *Best of Theatre* online magazine. The Hollywood actor also told journalist Andrew Marr, in an interview for BBC News on 14 September 2014, that he was surprised at the contemporary nature of *Salome*.

As for the Aesthetic Movement, there have been critical studies regarding it since its foundation. Even though Aestheticism may not be regarded as a defined artistic movement, some critics have helped to establish such a vision of it by means of studies which explore singular characteristics of the harmony of ideas regarding the autonomy of aesthetics. Walter Hamilton, as early as 1882, published a book entitled *The Aesthetic Movement in England*, in which he discusses features of an artistic movement which was still being developed. Owing to the fact that he presents a point of view as it were from within the movement, his remarks are used in the following chapters as a means of understanding the internal context of Aestheticism.

Several other books have been published on the subject, but R. V. Johnson‘s *Aestheticism* (1969) is a key text for the understanding of the Aesthetic Movement. His explanation is going to be addressed in the first chapter of the present study.

There are also some essays which are helpful in outlining the history of the aesthetic concept, from its origin until its autonomy. Gene Bell-Villada, the author of ‗The Idea of Art for Art‘s Sake: Intellectual Origins, Social Conditions, and Poetic Doctrine‘ (1986), J. S. Allen, who published ‗The Use and Abuse of Aestheticism‘ (2003), and Po Fang, who wrote ‗Style as the Man: The Aesthetics of Self-(Re)construction in Pater, Wilde and Yeats‘ (2004) are critics whose works are particularly relevant.

In relation to Wilde‘s essays there have also been ample studies, although at the time *Intentions* was published, critics regarded the essays as inconsistent mainly due to Wilde‘s use of mannerisms and linguistic features such as witticisms and epigrams. Wilde‘s employment of different philosophical sources was also considered a negative point in his critical writings. There were only a few critics who judged the book as a great achievement in terms of aesthetic criticism.

Since then, there have been many reappraisals of Wilde‘s critical essays, and, among the books written specifically on the subject, the most noteworthy are Peter Raby‘s *Oscar Wilde* (1988) and *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (2009),

Julia Prewitt Brow‘s *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art* (1999), and Frederick S. Roden‘s *Oscar Wilde Studies* (2004).

Peter Raby‘s *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (2009) is a collection of critical essays on three different topics: Wilde‘s context, Wilde‘s works, and thematic issues on aspects of culture and society. One of the most interesting essays in terms of Aesthetic criticism is the one written by Stephen Calloway, entitled ‗Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses‘, in which the author defines the ‗Dandyism of the Senses‘ as ‗a self-consciously precious and highly fastidious discrimination brought to bear on both art and life‘ (CALLOWAY, 2009, p. 34). Although Calloway aims at contextualising Wilde as a *fin-de-siècle* dandy [3] who perfected his senses and cultivated sensibilities, his remarks on Wilde‘s position towards Ruskin and Pater are crucial to the comprehension of Wilde as a Victorian thinker.

Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art is Julia Prewitt Brown‘s contribution to what she thinks to be Wilde‘s most important legacy: his philosophy of art. Although Brown sees *De Profundis* as the culmination of Wilde‘s aesthetics, and identifies Wilde‘s intellectual criticism with cosmopolitanism, her comments on Wilde‘s precursors are valuable in placing Wilde as an heir of Kant‘s philosophical thought.

Frederick S. Roden‘s book compiles several essays written by different authors on Wilde‘s works with varied approaches. One of the most significant in terms of the Aesthetic Movement is Allison Pease‘s ‗Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory‘, in which the author contextualises the roots of Aestheticism and explains that Wilde created his own version of it. Therefore, her remarks are consonant to one of the purposes of the present study.

Critics around the world have acknowledged Wilde‘s bright talent and his consolidated works of art, but the publications about his works are concentrated in English-speaking countries, and studies of Wilde have been infrequent in Brazil. In fact, most publications in Brazil about Wilde‘s life and works are translations, with a few exceptions resulting from academic research.

[3] The dandy is a special kind of character used by Oscal Wilde in all his comedies. In Wilde‘s tragedies there are also some characters who present dandy features. The dandy has an almost patterned behaviour. He is simultaneously clever, witty and scornful, and his most basic function is to entertain and ridicule the audience. Some critics identify the figure of the dandy with that of Wilde himself, for the dandy adopts a similar position towards society. The figure of the dandy is referred to in several chapters, but it is examined minutely in the last one.

Such is the case of *A presença de Oscar Wilde na 'Belle Époque' literária brasileira*, published in 1988 by Gentil Luiz de Faria. The book consists of a study of the reception of Oscar Wilde's works in the Brazilian *Belle Époque*. Oscar Wilde was also object of a comparison to Eça de Queiroz in a book by A. Casemiro da Silva, entitled *Eça e Wilde*, published in 1962.

Currently, Munira Mutran is Brazil's leading authority on Irish literature, as may be seen in *Álbum de Retratos; George Moore, Oscar Wilde e William Butler Yeats no fim do século XIX: um momento cultural* (2002) and also in *A Batalha das Estéticas* (2015). In *Álbum de Retratos*, Mutran focuses on the end of the nineteenth century, in order to comprehend the development of modernity in the early twentieth century. She uses autobiographical works by George Moore, Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats to understand aspects of the cultural scene of the last decades of the nineteenth century through the understanding of these authors about themselves. To this end, she analyses some works of Oscar Wilde from an autobiographical perspective, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis* and *Intentions* are seen as "documents of the self"[4] (MUTRAN, 2002, p. 16) and therefore considered manifestations of his identity. Although Mutran's goals differ from those proposed in the present study, since she considers the dandy to be a mask used by Wilde, her comments on the topic are very relevant and they will be addressed later.

In *A Batalha das Estéticas* (2015), her most recent book, Munira Mutran develops the idea that the several kinds of aesthetics which coincided at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Romanticism, Aestheticism, Decadence and Naturalism, were different ways of representing reality at a decisive moment. These artistic schools are confronted and dialogued in what George Moore calls "the battle of aesthetics" (MOORE, 1972, p. 107 apud MUTRAN, 2015, p. 16-7), and Mutran works with the texts of George Moore, William Butler Yeats and Oscar Wilde in order to reveal allusions, analogies, similarities and differences in their respective approaches to signifying reality. According to Mutran, in Oscar Wilde's work, Aestheticism and Symbolism are closely associated in opposition to Realism, as, for the Irish playwright, art was "a veil, rather than a mirror" (WILDE, 2003, p. 1082). In *A Batalha das Estéticas*, Mutran helps to outline the aesthetic ideas presented in Wilde's critical

[4] In the original text: "documentos do eu" (MUTRAN, 2002, p. 16).

works, emphasising that he was an exponent of several aesthetic theories rather than a single one.

The source for most of Wilde‘s works has been the Collins *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2003), from which all the extracts from Wilde‘s theoretical essays and most of the quotations from his plays are taken. However, the Collins volume utilises the first version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with four acts. As the perennial text of Wilde‘s masterpiece is the second version, with three acts, this play has been quoted from the Penguin edition (1994).

It cannot be emphasised sufficiently that, in order to comprehend Wilde‘s dramatic writing adequately, his plays must be seen in performance. Nevertheless, in the present study elements of production or reception of the plays have not been taken into account, mainly for a question of focus: the aim is to carry out a literary analysis of the literary texts. Therefore, this study does not allude to any performance whatsoever. However, as the texts are dramatic, they were written to be enacted, which means that Wilde‘s considerations about the audience are related to spectators instead of readers. Thus, even though this study seeks to consider the plays as literary texts, one of the greatest concerns is about how the audience regard the plays, that is, what kind of effects the texts of the plays when performed provoke in the spectators.

The doctoral thesis is structured in four chapters: the first addresses Aestheticism; the second focuses on Wilde‘s tragedies; the third presents Wilde‘s comedies, and the last one refers to the comparison between aesthetic theories and the texts of the dramatic works.

The aim of the first chapter not only is to introduce Aestheticism, but also to trace its roots in order to explore the context in which Wilde was working and the base he used for his works. Bearing that in mind, the Aesthetic Movement is discussed at length and an analysis of the concept of aesthetics is conducted, from its origins until its autonomy, taking account of the changes it has underwent over time. The discussion of the concept of aesthetics is followed by an examination of Oscar Wilde‘s aesthetics, considering his borrowings as well as his remodelling of ideas from several other writers, which shaped his own version of Aestheticism. Walter Pater‘s works are discussed, including the preface of *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1888), as well as the introduction and conclusion of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), for it is in these texts that he advocates his aesthetic principles. Oscar Wilde‘s essays from *Intentions* (2003) are then presented, as they are seen as the aesthetic

theories encompassing the principles of the Aesthetic Movement. Through these essays Wilde helped to found and establish the doctrines of Aestheticism. Finally, a comparative analysis is made between the precepts supported by Pater and those created by Wilde, as well as those incorporated and modified by him. The principles of the Aesthetic Movement are outlined according to the perspective of each writer. In fact, Oscar Wilde‘s critical writings were seen for a long time as imitative of Pater‘s. Nevertheless, when both their aesthetic works are compared, it is noticeable that Wilde took Pater‘s concepts as a starting point for his own considerations, attributing to them a new perspective. Therefore, Wilde‘s aesthetic perception is considered as the main basis for the theoretical foundation used to analyse his plays.

In the second and third chapters, Wilde‘s tragedies and comedies are respectively presented. Each chapter is structured as follows: the chapter is introduced with theatrical elements, after which each play receives a commentary constituted of three parts: linguistic components, theatrical structure and the critics‘ perspective at the time when the plays were created. As the texts of the plays are addressed as literary rather than performative, linguistic aspects are seen as being capable of holding sufficient interpretative significance. Nonetheless, these texts are still dramatic, and therefore they present a theatrical structure that cannot be ignored. Hence, plot, scenes, acts, characters, dialogue, action and other dramatic elements are going to be scrutinised, in order to provide one of the bases necessary for the comparative analysis in the final chapter. The critical reception of the plays serves as a basis for evaluating how the contemporary notion of each of them has evolved from that which prevailed at the time of their premieres.

In the final chapter, the procedures observed in the use of the author‘s aesthetic theories when he wrote each play are discussed, in order to verify whether any change occurs in the process of transposing aesthetic ideas into the texts of the plays. Considering the texts of the plays as the referred *practice* and Wilde‘s theoretical-critical essays as the *theory*, the incidence of theory in practice will be demonstrated, that is, the aim is to evidence the extent to which Wilde uses his own aesthetic considerations in the elaboration of his plays. In order to systematise the discussion of Wilde‘s thoughts, the comparative analysis is divided according to the elements of aesthetic theories found in the plays, for some of the aesthetic concepts coincide both in the comedies and in the tragedies.

The ultimate goal of the present study is to help scholars and other interested readers to understand that the incidence of Wilde‘s aesthetic theories in his dramatic works enlarges the possibilities of new analyses of each play, even according to contemporary perspectives, which helps not only to broaden the comprehension of Wilde‘s works, but also to recognise that any theoretical perspective regarding the analysis of Wilde‘s oeuvre is in some way aesthetic.

2. Aestheticism

Aestheticism, which occurred in the twilight of the Victorian Era in Great Britain, was an artistic movement which had as its basic principle the conception of an intrinsic value of art, that is, that the value of art lies in its beauty and, therefore, it cannot be judged by moral, didactic or utilitarian functions. Its two major exponents were Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

In fact, Aestheticism can be better acknowledged as a tendency than a movement, for it arose as many scattered ideas which emerged in the same epoch, around the period between 1868 and 1901. Indeed, Aestheticism can be considered the compilation of several ideas regarding the importance of beauty in relation to other values, such as ethics, utilitarianism and didacticism, which were the predominant criteria for art criticism at the time.

Nevertheless, among those somewhat loose ideas, there can be identified some common thoughts which form the basis of what started to be called the Aesthetic Movement. According to Anne Varty in *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, Aestheticism is

> a movement in the arts which developed in Britain during the later tnineteenth century as a protest against the prevailing industrial emphasis on ‗the useful' or utilitarianism. Aestheticism places art in binary opposition to life and values art at the expense of life. It privileges form over content, style over sincerity or ‗truth', and prizes ornament, colour, intensity and pleasurable effect. The primary exponent of aestheticism in England was Walter Pater, who learned from the French school of Gautier and Baudelaire (1998, p. 235).

Anne Varty does not seem to acknowledge Oscar Wilde as one of the major exponents of the Aesthetic Movement. Due to the fact that Wilde borrowed many of his ideas from a range of varied authors, critics and philosophers, he is sometimes seen as an aesthetic personage rather than a serious art critic. In fact, his role in the Aesthetic Movement is sometimes considered to be derived from the fact that he was continually caricatured in *Punch*, a satirical magazine which embraced the ridicule of Aestheticism, playing the role of an anti-aesthetic current. Nonetheless, he had a fundamental role in concretising the split between ethics and aesthetics, and our contemporary views of art and art criticism owe much to him.

Apart from the fact that Pater is indicated as a proponent of Aestheticism, in the above extract it is also remarkable that Gautier and Baudelaire are pointed out as his masters, for they were not supporters of the same artistic school. Gautier was a key

figure in Romanticism, whereas Baudelaire stood as the main precursor of Symbolism. Therefore, the Aesthetic Movement is not constituted as ‗one simple phenomenon, but a group of related phenomena, all reflecting a conviction that the enjoyment of beauty can by itself give value and meaning to life' (JOHNSON, 1969, p. 10).

R. V. Johnson in *Aestheticism* (1969) outlines three different aspects of the Aesthetic Movement, which are worth mentioning, for his view includes features which will also be covered in this work. According to Johnson, Aestheticism can be seen ‗as a view of art, as a view of life and as a practical tendency in literature and the arts (and in literary and art criticism)' (1969, p. 12). In the first sense, that is, as a view of art, Johnson claims that aestheticism makes a clear distinction between art and life to the point that art is said to make no reference to life, hence there is no moral connotation between them. In fact, any moralistic view in art is seen as incidental, for the primary aim of art is beauty, and this is exactly what Pater states in the preface to *Appreciations*, as will be seen later. Taking this view to an extreme, states Johnson, it could be said that art does not need meaning, for aesthetic pleasure is its ultimate goal. Johnson recognises, though, that the motto ‗art for art's sake' could mean simply a defence of the artist's freedom to express whatever he wishes to, without having to be concerned about didactic exposition. In fact, Johnson sees Aestheticism as a response to the prevailing view of art established many centuries before by Roman poet, Horace, in *Art Poetry*, according to which the function of art is to instruct and delight.

If Aestheticism is regarded as a view of life, declares Johnson, then it will be implied that life is going to be appreciated for its beauty, variety and dramatic spectacle. However, in order to do that, the aesthete has to play the role of spectator of his own life, and thus he has a contemplative approach to life. Both Pater and Wilde advocate this point of view, for the first argues that art adds most to our experience in life, whereas the latter is in favour of hedonism. Pater's and Wilde's views are going to be expanded afterwards.

The third aspect of Aestheticism, as a tendency in literature and art as well as in literary and art criticism, is described negatively: ‗a movement away from didacticism, from any pretension to convey a moral or to expound a philosophy of life' (JOHNSON, 1969, p. 23). Therefore, it is the principle of art for art's sake put into practice in works of literature as well as works of art. This has as a long-term result the relaxation of censorship, but it also has a great impact on literature and art criticism, for ethics, religion and philosophy are no longer regarded as valid criteria for judging works of art.

The work of the critic starts to be interpretative rather than evaluative, and his task is to show people the impression the work of art has caused on him/her. Therefore the work of the critic is subjective and impressionistic and it can form the basis for another work of art, which is the view advocated by Wilde, as will be exposed later.

All three aspects mentioned by Johnson in his book coincide with Pater‘s and Wilde‘s ideas. In this study, Aestheticism will be considered as encompassing the three of them: a view of art, a view of life, and a tendency in literature and the arts and in literary and art criticism. Each of them covers at least one aspect of the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement, and they make it possible to understand better the phenomena that constituted it. In reality, as far as this thesis is concerned, the first two applications of the term refer to aesthetic theory itself, whereas the third one concerns the application of this theory to literary works, which in this study means all of Wilde‘s plays.

2.1 Aesthetics background: the path to an autonomous art perception

As mentioned above, Aestheticism presents several features derived from different sources. In order to understand the origins and roots of the phenomena which led to the Aesthetic Movement it is necessary to go back as far as 1750, when one of the first landmarks in the studies of aesthetics was established, as pointed out by several critics.

In his essay, _The Use and Abuse of Aestheticism‘ (2003), J. S. Allen, for example, claims the emergence of the first aesthetic theory in 1750 by Alexander Baumgarten as one of the first instances to promote the autonomy of aesthetics. Allen‘s view is consonant with Po Fang‘s, who asserts, in his article, _Style as the Man: The Aesthetics of Self-(Re)construction in Pater, Wilde and Yeats‘, published in 2004, that the concept of aesthetics started to be outlined when Alexander Baumgarten published *Aesthetica*, where he appropriated and coined with new meaning the word which gives the book its title. According to Fang, this word comes from the Greek _æsthesis‘ and it refers to the whole region of human perception and sensation. He adds that Baumgarten declares aesthetic cognition to mediate between the generalities of reason and the particularities of the senses.

Nevertheless, from the studies of Gene Bell-Villada, who published an essay entitled _The Idea of Art for Art‘s Sake: Intellectual Origins, Social Conditions, and Poetic Doctrine‘ (1986), it is possible to discover that, when the word *aesthetica*

emerged in Baumgarten‘s book, it did not refer to an independent concept and was seen as part of the field of philosophy. From this point, states Bell-Villada, many philosophers from the Enlightenment period started to study the relation between beauty and the mind, that is, aesthetics and philosophy. According to Bell-Villada, in Baumgarten‘s book there are some postulates which serve as a basis for Immanuel Kant‘s work, *Critique of Judgement*, published forty years later, in 1790. With the publication of his book, Kant was the first to explain the bond between philosophy and aesthetics, which is seen as a step on the way to aesthetic autonomy. J. S. Allen (2003) shares this point of view, as he claims the rise of Kant‘s philosophical ideas about how aesthetic judgment can provide man with a disinterested satisfaction in beauty as another step towards aesthetic autonomy. Julia Prewitt-Brow, in *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art* (1999), comments that _[t]he distinct place occupied by the aesthetic in Kant, its theoretic separation from the other faculties, would provide the basis for all aestheticism to follow‘ (p. 35). Therefore, Kant is regarded as one of the philosophers who played a key role in the development of autonomous aesthetics.

In 1835, there was a new turning point in the studies related to aesthetics which came with the publication of the novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Théophile Gautier. Even though it is not a theoretical book, its importance is fundamental when it comes to aesthetic autonomy. In the preface to his novel, Gautier claims that art has no relation to morals, public good or anything else but the aesthetic pleasure of beauty. According to J. S. Allen (2003), Gautier was the first to proclaim that art has no influence over morals, as it does not influence society either for good or evil. Indeed, as stated by Allen, for Gautier the true purpose of art is inversely proportionate to its social utility. Thus, there is no need to look for other goals in art since art can only promote aesthetic pleasure, and that is all it can do.

Ultimately, according to Allen, the last steps towards the split between aesthetics and ethics were taken by Romantic writers, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who celebrated art and imagination as the way to truth and life energy.

Nevertheless, Walter Hamilton in *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882) points to another precedent which was immediately prior to the foundation of the Aesthetic Movement: the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Hamilton‘s book opens with an entire chapter dedicated to the Pre-Raphaelites. According to him, the Aesthetic

Movement initiated with the creation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was constituted by a young artists' group firstly united under the shared interest of returning art to nature. They also had in common an admiration for medieval artists from the period preceding the Renaissance painter Raphael, from which their name derives. The members of the group used to sign their works with the initials of the group's name: PRB. Nonetheless, when the last member, Edward Burne-Jones, joined the group, there were fundamental changes, for Burne-Jones thought that art should present an immaculate devotion to beauty as well as seeking perfection intensely, since he had in mind that the imitation of nature was a disqualifying element of imaginative art. Following Burne-Jones' ideas, the Pre-Raphaelites changed some of the group's principles, which were further used to outline the Aesthetic Movement's doctrine.

In *Oscar Wilde* (1988), Peter Raby states that the Pre-Raphaelites, in their turn, owe much to John Ruskin, who _through *Modern Painters, Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, did more than anyone to open the eyes of the Victorians to a new appreciation of visual art. He was the great theoretical precursor of the Pre-Raphaelites [...]' (p. 19). Raby clarifies, however, that although Ruskin privileged a literary and artistic approach related to the impressions of the senses, and mainly to the effects provoked by beauty, his perceptions are permeated by morals, which distances him from the aims of Aestheticism and also from Pater's point of view. According to Walter Hamilton, even though the view of Ruskin and Aestheticism writers perceptions are divergent, _there is no doubt but that the *true* Aesthetic School owes much to him, not only for pointing out the real direction in which pure art and real beauty are to be found, but also for a style of phraseology, forcible and picturesque in itself' (HAMILTON, 1882, p. 20). Therefore, Ruskin to some extent paved the way for ideas related to the autonomy of aesthetics. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's devotion to nature was advocated by John Ruskin, who supported the group's rejection of conventions. Nevertheless, in 1853, after John Ruskin had his marriage annulled, John Everett Millais – one of the founders of the PRB – got married to Ruskin's former wife and abandoned the group. At the end of 1853, the PRB was virtually dissolved. Thus, when Edward Burne-Jones joined the group in its later phase, he could easily add his own perspective, which was more similar to that of the Aesthetic Movement than to that of the PRB.

It is also noticeable that Hamilton points out that the aim of many Aestheticism devotees is to indicate the features that make a work of art to be considered artistic, as

well as what elements in these works can be considered to embody beauty. Therefore, the role of the writers, painters, philosophers, sculptors and artists of Aestheticism is the same played by critics. Consequently, all works produced by artists of the Aesthetic Movement are in some way critical too.

As both Ruskin and Pater were Wilde's tutors at university, they are frequently associated as sources of inspiration, and on this issue, Stephen Calloway in an article entitled "Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses', published in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (2009), states that

> Wilde of course belonged initially to that generation of Oxford Aesthetes who, beginning as disciples of Ruskin, first espoused his earnest, Christian, medieval and Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasms and his desire for "Truth to Nature" in art, only to be seduced in due course by the more indulgently neo-pagan, Renaissance-inspired, "decadent" and, consequently, rather dangerously glamorous teachings of Walter Pater (2009, p. 35).

According to Calloway's view, there was a change of interest in Wilde as well as other aesthetes when they came into contact with Walter Pater, for, whereas Ruskin represented a more classical position towards the arts, with his association between beauty, truth and nature, Pater had a more contemporary approach, which, instead of being restricted by social rules, favoured an aesthetic experience dedicated to beauty. Pater's notion of art for art's sake "had a tremendous appeal for these young men seeking an escape from the, at times, stifling confines of Victorian painting and writing; from those arts weighed down by an ever increasing burden of moral, social and sentimental baggage' (CALLOWAY, 2009, p. 37). Therefore, Pater played a decisive role in the development of a more artistic and less moralistic attitude in relation to aesthetics. For that reason, he exerted a fascination over his aesthetic students, in such a way that Wilde himself would later refer, in *De Profundis*, to his copy of Pater's book *The Renaissance* as "that book which has had such a strange influence over my life' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1022).

Either direct or indirectly, from these writers, the aesthetic concept started to have some autonomy till the onset of the Aesthetic Movement, when all these assertions were given momentum and were embedded in a number of other values, which were a hallmark for a new art framework.

When Oscar Wilde published "The Critic as Artist' in 1891, the split between aesthetics and ethics was completed with his statement that both belong to different spheres. Finally the scenery was prepared for the acceptance of a concept of aesthetics

as autonomous and independent from morals and ethics. This change has directly affected the concepts of art and art criticism since then, for both started to be analysed from an aesthetic perspective.

2.2 Walter Pater and the premises of the Aesthetic Movement

Walter Pater, as one of the main theorists of Aestheticism, proposed a new aesthetic philosophy whose explanation is inserted in the preface as well as the conclusion of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873). The preface and conclusion of his *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1888) are also sources of information about characteristics that make a literary work into a work of art, for they contain arguments in favour of subjective and impression-based art and literature, emphasising the role of the critic as the one who is able to leave moral standards aside to judge art according to one single criterion: beauty.

In fact, the conclusion of *The Renaissance* is considered by most critics to be the gospel of British Aestheticism, but the essay on style mentioned in the title of *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* also makes an important contribution to aesthetic ideas. Therefore, both of them are going to be considered as key texts in establishing the premises of the Aesthetic Movement.

2.2.1 *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*

Walter Pater opens the preface of *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* by exposing the diverse positions of several writers about the differences between prose and poetry and adds that his proposal is: ‗to point out certain qualities of all literature as a fine art, which, if they apply to the literature of fact, apply still more to the literature of the imaginative sense of fact, while they apply indifferently to verse and prose, so far as either is really imaginative‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 8). Pater makes a distinction between what he calls literature of fact and literature of the imaginative sense of fact, which may be regarded as the dichotomy between scientific literature and imaginative literature, for elsewhere he declares that science is a domain where imaginative writing is seen as an intruder. He highlights, however, the fact that, irrespective of being scientific or literary, there are some characteristics of a work that make it a work of art, and his objective is to define these features.

Next, he asserts that, in literature as well as in history, writers do not deal with facts, but with their sense of fact, which can be assimilated according to their peculiar intuition of the world, for the purpose of the artist is his comprehension of the world. According to the truth of the artist‘s comprehension, a literary work will be an art work:

> [f]or just in proportion as the writer's aim, consciously or unconsciously, comes to be the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of his sense of it, he becomes an artist, his work fine art; and good art (as I hope ultimately to show) in proportion to the truth of his presentment of that sense (PATER, 2001, p. 9).

Therefore, truth is the essence of the artistic quality mentioned, as all the beauty of an artwork lies in its truth. Pater adds that there can be no merit in art without truth, and he explains that truth is _expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 10). In other words, the truth of a work of art is the match between the writer‘s style and his inner vision, which results in beauty.

In this way, states Pater, literary art is the version of a fact related to the soul or the representation of a specific personality in its preferences, wills and power, that is, a mixture of style and point of view. The issue of any artistic or imaginative literature is the transcription not of the mere fact, but of the fact in its endless variety, modified by human preferences in all its infinity of varied forms. Thus, each fact used as raw material for a work of art can be worked in endless ways, for it will be personalised according to the artist‘s inclination. For Pater, a work of art _will be good literary art not because it is brilliant or sober, or rich, or impulsive, or severe, but just in proportion as its representation of that sense, that soul-fact, is true‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 11). Namely, art will be considered superior if it truly expresses the writer‘s impressive perspective.

Next Pater asserts that prose is the imaginative writing of the modern world, for it can be _as varied in its excellence as humanity itself reflecting on the facts of its latest experience‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 11). Then he starts defining the literary artist, who is _of necessity a scholar‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 12), since a literary artist shall have in his works scholarly conscience. He adds that a writer, working with his language, which is a material with its own laws, can think of those laws as limitations and restrictions for his work, but if he is a real artist, he _will find in them an opportunity‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 13). It is possible to apprehend from this claim that real artists have, first of all, a different perspective from common writers, as they are able to overcome their limitations and create opportunities out of restrictions. He concludes his definition of the literary artist by saying that,

> [a]live to the value of an atmosphere in which every term finds its utmost degree of expression, and with all the jealousy of a lover of words, he will resist a constant tendency on the part of the majority of those who use them to efface the distinctions of language, the facility of writers often reinforcing in this respect the work of the vulgar. He will feel the obligation not of the laws only, but of those affinities, avoidances, those mere preferences, of his language, which through the associations of literary history have become a part of its nature, prescribing the rejection of many a neology, many a license, many a gipsy phrase which might present itself as actually expressive (2001, p. 13).

The artist is extremely aware both of what he wants to express, and the words he wishes to discard. Evidently, the work of a writer is conscious, for every literary artist is attentive to the words he selects or rejects when he seeks for an instrument of an adequate and faithful expression, which will be in the most exact sense original _to the colouring of his own spirit‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 15). As the chosen words have to match his mood, the artist is said to have the ability to observe which one carries the meaning necessary to create an atmosphere that reveals his soul‘s disposition.

Pater goes on to comment on the ability of a good writer to compose a literary work which arouses interest on his readers, and he asserts that

> [a] scholar writing for the scholarly, [the scholar] will of course leave something to the willing intelligence of his reader. […] To really strenuous minds there is a pleasurable stimulus in the challenge for a continuous effort on [the scholarly] part, to be rewarded by securer and more intimate grasp of the author‘s sense (PATER, 2001, p. 17).

As Pater states that the real artist is a scholar and that his audience consists of scholars, it is implicit his belief that the audience‘s eager intellect is ready to be challenged. It is comprehensible, therefore, that the writer, when composing artistic writings, should leave some lacunae to be completed by the imaginative minds of the readers. That is even clearer when Pater quotes Schiller and declares that _[t]he artist […] may be known rather by what he omits”; and in literature, too, the true artist may be best recognised by his tact of omission‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 18). In this sense, omission is also one of the characteristics that enable literature to be recognised as art. Furthermore, omission implies that the reader complements the sense of the work, for it is his responsibility to complete the lacunae left by the writer. Nonetheless, the completion of the text‘s meaning is intended to apprehend the author‘s sense, for the reader is not seen as having the autonomy to create his own sense in order to complete these lacunae.

Pater also states that those who have a disinterested love of literature will seek it as _a refuge, a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world‘

(PATER, 2001, p. 18). Consequently, literature is seen as a safe haven where artists are protected from vulgarity, for no work of art shall be qualified as vulgar. In fact, he states that in works of art there must not be any vulgar or imperfect decoration, and every permissible literary ornament will be structural or necessary, as ‗the [...] beauty of all literary style is of its very essence, and independent […] of all removable decoration' (PATER, 2001, p. 19). Therefore, the exquisiteness of a good literary work is formed by its structure.

Based on this remark, Pater proposes discussing the elements which constitute the structure of a literary text, as for him, in literature as well as in all art, structure is considered the most relevant source of beauty. The structure of the literary text mentioned by Pater is what he calls the architectonical conception of work. Pater provides one example of this architectonical conception by stating that it may be seen as the ability of the writer to organise his text in such a way that the reader is supposed to foresee the end of the text in the beginning of it, for ‗every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence' (PATER, 2001, p. 21). Therefore, the writer resorts to constructional resources that enable the continuity of the literary text. Pater denominates the writer's ability to form an architectonical conception of the literary work as the necessity of mind in style, which is seen as the literary condition for the creation of a work of art. Style, then, rather than an innate characteristic of the writer, is deliberately constructed, and the writer's conscience is essential to its development.

He also argues that style ‗depends upon the original unity, the vital wholeness and identity, of the initiatory apprehension or view' (PATER, 2001, p. 22). Pater adds that the literary work requires a logical coherence that should be evidenced not only in the composition of the text as a whole, but also in the choices made by the writer towards one single word in the building of a sentence or in the manner of the text, whether it is argumentative, descriptive or discursive, for these choices are also part of the entire design of the work of art.

Pater goes on to note that literary architecture not only consist of predicting the end in the beginning of a work, but also in developing the growth of its creation in the process of execution – with many irregularities, surprises and afterthoughts – and, in this process, the contingent and the necessary parts of it must be included in the unity of the whole text. Pater continues this idea by saying that the literary artist should establish his text piece by piece, in order to reorganise the negligence of his first draft. Thus, the writer should repeat his steps only if the repetition could give the reader an idea of

progress, for the work would be supposed to be structured throughout its own creation. For Pater, artistic creation should be a conscious architectural composition, as constructive intelligence is a form of imagination, and style is also a function of the mind.

A conflict between soul and mind emerges when Pater considers style as the manifestation of the writer‘s uniqueness and argues that the writer should manifest in a literary text his sense of the world‘s facts, for this sense should not be only connected to the artist‘s soul, but should also be realised by his constructive intelligence.

However, Pater asserts that the writer can touch the reader through both mind and soul, as it is possible to notice in this extract: ‗[b]y mind, the literary artist reaches us, through static and objective indications of design in his work, legible to all. By soul, he reaches us, [...] through vagrant sympathy and a kind of immediate contact‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 25). It is implicit that, if a literary work is to be characterised as a work of art, it should touch the reader, independently of the means the writer uses to do so.

Finally, according to Pater, the qualities of the soul and the mind find their structure and their architecture in the structure of human life. In this perspective, Pater shows he is in favour of a subjectivist and impressionist literature, which can be held in the writer‘s soul and mind.

Nonetheless, the writer‘s subjectivity is not the only reason for a literary work to be considered a work of art. A literary work will be considered a work of art in proportion to the truth of the artist‘s subjective expression, as has already been mentioned. However, in the Aesthetic Movement, truth is related to beauty. Pater declares that, in literature as well as in all forms of art, there are absolute and relative beauties, and the exact proportion of both in a literary work results in the absolute beauty of style, whether in prose or poetry. ‗In […] literature, […] the one indispensable beauty is, after all, truth: […] truth […] as accuracy, truth […] as expression, that finest and most intimate form of truth, the *vraie vérité*‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 34).

The true artist, according to Pater, should remember that the only beauty of literary style is that of its own essence. As may be inferred, if the only indispensable beauty is truth, and beauty of style lies in its own essence, then, the essence of style is truth. Once more, it is worth mentioning that, for Pater, truth is subjective, for it is conditioned to the impressions of the artist. Thus, beauty is also subjective. Even though Pater does not present a delimited concept of beauty, he still emphasises that the end of

art is nothing but beauty. He states that ‗[t]hose who write in good style are sometimes accused of a neglect of ideas, and of the moral end, as if the end of the physician were something else than healing, of the painter than painting – as if the end of art were not, before all else, the beautiful' (PATER, 2001, p. 29). Pater clarifies here the fact that any kind of moral end a critic may find in a work of art is incidental, for the aim of art is the beautiful; whether a work of art may be regarded as useful or not, is not of the artist's concern, for he must keep in mind his ultimate goal, which is beauty.

In its turn, the writer's work consists of finding the only way by which he can express himself, for the artist has to find his individual way of expressing truth in order to add beauty to his work. Quoting Gustave Flaubert, Pater asserts that,

> [p]ossessed of an absolute belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing, one word to call it by, one adjective to qualify, one verb to animate it, he [...] [gives] himself the superhuman labour for the discovery, in every phrase, of that word, that verb, that epithet. [...] The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there!—the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within. In that perfect justice, over and above the many contingent and removable beauties with which beautiful style may charm us, but which it can exist without, […] lay the specific, indispensable, very intellectual, beauty of literature, the possibility of which constitutes it a fine art (PATER, 2001, p. 29-30).

This accuracy in the choice of the words of a text is characteristic of the writer's conscious work in the construction of the literary work, and it is precisely this quality which models the writer's style. Pater concludes by saying that style is the man. In that light, style is the individuality of man, his complete sense of what he has to say, his sense of the world. For those who claim that style can become a mere whim and even an affected mannerism, Pater clarifies that style is not the man in his irrational, involuntary or affected impulses, but in his absolutely sincere apprehension of what is most real for him. Thus, if style is the man, in all the colour and intensity of a true apprehension, then his sense of what is real will be impersonal.

Once more, Pater quotes some remarks made by Flaubert, according to whom style is specifically an accurate, absolute and unique way of expressing something, in all its intensity and colour. According to Pater, in Flaubert's thought, the material and basis for a work of art imposes necessarily the unique and precise expression, measure, rhythm, that is, form in all its characteristics. For Flaubert, as for Pater, style is directly related to the singular form of the text given by its author.

Therefore, the beauty of literature lies in its uniqueness. In other words, singularity is the possibility of beauty in literary work and, hence, it is also the possibility for literature to be constituted as a work of art. Pater emphasises that the beauty of an artwork does not lie only in its form or its substance; the beauty of a work of art is related both to form and substance. According to him,

> [t]here are no beautiful thoughts [...] without beautiful forms, and conversely. As it is impossible to extract from a physical body the qualities which really constitute it [...] without [...] destroying it; just so it is impossible to detach the form from the idea, for the idea only exists by virtue of the form (PATER, 2001, p. 30).

Therefore, an attempt to split form and substance in a work of art can only result in its destruction, for both form and substance are inseparable. Although Pater had stated that beauty lies in the structure of the work of art, he does not consider structure to be the only element to bring beauty to the work of art. Substance should also be accounted for the exquisiteness of a work of art.

Another significant statement made by Pater in *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* is the comparison between music and literature, in order to distinguish _good art' from _great art'. According to him, music and prosaic literature are opposite extremes of art; literary art presents, through intelligence, a range of interests as free and diverse as those presented by music through the senses to imagination. If music is the ideal of all art, adds Pater, precisely because in music it is impossible to detach form and thought, and matter from expression, then literature, finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of a term to its meaning, will be considered good art. Actually, this distinction between good and great art comes from the fact that music always benefited from being considered high art, that is, having delight as its major function and, therefore, not being supposed to be useful, didactic or moralistic. Literature, on the other hand, did not enjoy this advantage; hence it is considered by Pater to be good art.

Pater clarifies that good art is not necessarily great: concerning literature, the distinction between them does not depend on its form, but on its substance. For Pater, whilst beauty of form is related to the writer's style, beauty of substance is related to the qualification of a work as art, for, if it is possible to see the writer's singular style through form, through substance it is possible to verify if the work produced by the writer, when he puts his impressions and apprehensions of the world into the text, is good, great or both. Indeed, the difference between great art and good art lies in its reputation, for a great art, such as music, has beauty as its content, rather than useful or

moral information. When a piece of writing discards utilitarianism and focuses on beauty, literature can become great art.

At the end of his book, in a section entitled _Postscript‘, Pater summarises all his ideas – which concern romantic and classical schools of art – and makes an assertion that summarises his introduction:

> [a]ppealing, as he may, to precedent in this matter, the scholar will still remember that if ~~t~~he style is the man” it is also the age: […]: that in literature as in other matters it is well to unite as many diverse elements as may be: that the individual writer or artist, certainly, is to be estimated by the number of graces he combines, and his power of interpenetrating them in a given work. To discriminate schools, of art, of literature, is, of course, part of the obvious business of literary criticism: but, in the work of literary production, it is easy to be overmuch occupied concerning them. For, in truth, the legitimate contention is, not of one age or school of literary art against another, but of all successive schools alike, against the stupidity which is dead to the substance, and the vulgarity which is dead to form (2001, p. 261).

When Pater asserts that style is the man and the age, it is possible to notice that style carries features both of the artist and of the time in which this artist is inserted. Nevertheless, the scholar critic should keep in mind that he should assess the artist‘s work based on the quantity of beautiful characteristics he includes and combines in a work of art. Pater concludes his text by upholding that, even though discriminating between schools of art is an important task for literary critics, the most important one is to distinguish the characteristics which are attributed to works of art independently of the art school to which they may belong. Once more, Pater recapitulates form and substance as the most important elements containing artistic features.

2.2.2 *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry*

Walter Pater starts the preface of *The Renaissance* by saying that many attempts have been made to define the concept of abstract beauty, in order _to express it in the most general terms, to find a universal formula for it‘ (PATER, 1910, p. vii). Nevertheless, he asserts that these attempts are a meaningless and useless task, for beauty is a relative concept, hence it cannot be defined in general terms. Instead, beauty should be defined in the most concrete terms, for finding the most adequate expression of its manifestations is the aim of the true student of aesthetics.

Pater quotes Matthew Arnold to point out that the aim of true criticism is ‗to see the object [of art] as in itself it really is' (PATER, 1910, p. viii). He adds that the first step in reaching this goal is to know the critic's own impression about the object, in order to distinguish it and perceive it directly. Therefore, not only does Pater agree with Arnold, but he also explains how to put his theory into practice, that is, he adds a comment to clarify how a critic can see the object as it really is.

Pater goes on to declare that the artistic objects criticised by aesthetic critics have many qualities that affect the reader and also the critic. In fact, Pater declares that the work of the critic is to search for the answer to the questions: What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to ME? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?' (PATER, 2009, p. viii). According to Pater, if the critic is able to find the answers to this kind of questions, that is, if the critic can apprehend the impressions that a work of art produces on him/her, then he/she does not need to worry about the abstract concept of beauty or the exact relation of beauty to truth or experience, for they are speculative reasoning and, as such, Pater considers them to be ‗metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere' (2009, p. ix).

If the task of the art critic is to ask himself the listed questions in order to analyse the impressions caused by the work of art upon him, as a result, the analysis is going to be self-centred and subjective. It is remarkable to notice that objects of art can be regarded by aesthetic critics as powerful, for they are able to produce pleasure. Every effect, either pleasurable or not, that a work of art produces on a critic should be examined, for the critic's aim is not to define the abstract concept of beauty, but to analyse the impressions produced by works of art in empirical terms. Like a chemist, the critic should reduce the influence he feels to its elements. The critic, states Pater, will have completed his task when he has distinguished each of the forces that produce pleasurable sensations and when he has indicated the source of those impressions as well as the conditions under which they are experienced. Therefore, Pater hopes to systematise beauty, as to change a subjective field into a scientific and objective one.

Pater emphasises once more that the most important point for the aesthetic critic is not having an abstract definition of beauty, but possessing a certain kind of temperament, which is ‗the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects' (PATER, 2009, p. x). Therefore, if the critic has the ideal temperament and is

able to be touched by artistic impressions, then he will not need to waste his time defining beauty, for he is going to be busy analysing his impressions. The critic, adds Pater, will always remember the existence of beauty in many ways, as for him, all periods, types and literary schools are equivalent, since in all aesthetic schools there has been a great artist and a great work of art.

Pater asserts that in each era or age there are different forms of art manifestation which are not automatically connected to each other. Each of them has common characteristics with the others, but they do not form a whole unity. Instead, each is confined to its own circle of ideas, and they enjoy the benefit of their isolation. Nevertheless, there are times when philosophers, artists and intellectuals have closer thoughts, which form favourable eras where ideas are shared and communicated, and a unity of spirit is reached. Pater considers the Renaissance to be one of those eras.

Nonetheless, adds Pater, a critic cannot limit himself to any literary school, for, insofar as his work is subjective and impressionist, it is also too singular to be restricted by current parameters in a literary school. Thus, Pater claims that the key to knowing what may go unnoticed by the aesthetic critic is testing different theories, opinions and points of view, and never superficially acquiescing with orthodox philosophies. In that light, it is possible to assume that the role of the critic is to scrutinise the feelings and sensations provoked by works of art, including the apprehended beauty this work of art may evoke in the critic.

Pater makes forceful statements in relation to some precepts of the Aesthetic Movement, as he stresses the shortness of life and human behaviour regarding it. He starts his conclusion expounding on physical life, and discoursing over the inward world of thought and feeling: the way one apprehends the external world in his/her inner beings is what constitutes experience. Experience, in its turn, is undergone even more quickly and can be reduced to a group of impressions that last only a single moment. Human lives consist of a collection of those moments for they give humans a quickened, multiplied consciousness, and human beings should try to expand them as much as they can, for success in life is living in continual ecstasy. For the author, people are condemned to live in the gap between birth and death, and therefore, it is important to expand this gap to the utmost, in order to get the maximum pulse within the time given. Pater emphasises the fact that some people waste their gap with lethargy, some with great passions and the wisest with music and arts. He ends by claiming that art is capable of enabling men to enlarge the number of pulses in life. This view presents a

trait of hedonism, for it is Pater‘s guidance for a pursuit of pleasure and a devotion to the delight of the senses.

As a result, Pater‘s aesthetic conception consists of a set of doctrines regarding the attitudes of the critic and the artist in relation to the work of art, but it also includes teachings about beauty and human behaviour before it. For Pater, the theory of art for art‘s sake becomes the theory of art for life‘s sake.[5]

2.3 Wildean aesthetics: inception and outcomes

Oscar Wilde participated in the end of a process that culminated in a new concept of aesthetics and, subsequently, of art. In the course of developing his own ideas, he had some biased views which he borrowed from other writers and philosophers. The aim of this study is not to contribute to the debate about Wilde‘s originality, but to refer to some critics‘ perspectives over his use of other people‘s thoughts to found his own.

In fact, Ian Small, in *Oscar Wilde Revalued* (1993), asserts that there are two general tendencies towards analysing Wilde‘s critical writing: ‗The first has been to set it against the traditional nineteenth-century criticism, such as that of Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin or Walter Pater, which Wilde either exploits or rejects, depending upon the thesis of the critic. ‗[...] The second [...] is in terms of the way it anticipates the concerns of early modernism‘ (SMALL, 1993, p.182-184). According to Small, the two tendencies are not mutually exclusive, for Wilde‘s critical writings establish his reputation in relation to his forerunners, but can also be accepted as a starting-point for new criticism, as he left a legacy for succeeding critics.

One of the first critics to write about Oscar Wilde‘s role in the Aesthetic Movement was Walter Hamilton, who published a book in 1882 about the principles of this artistic movement in England, even before Wilde himself had published his critical writings. Although Hamilton‘s point of view may seem restricted, above all because he did not have an unbiased view of the events he was reporting, he is one of the few authors to address the events in progress for he shows them from an inner perspective.

One of the most interesting aspects of Hamilton‘s book is his last chapter, which is entirely devoted to Oscar Wilde and his aesthetic tour of the United States and

[5] This is one the most important claims J. S. Allen makes in his essay ‗The use and abuse of aestheticism‘ (2003).

Canada in 1882. Hamilton quotes key extracts from interviews Wilde gave to local newspapers while in the United States. Among them, there is Wilde‘s pronouncement to the *New York Herald* about the Aesthetic Movement. When asked by the journalist if he called Aestheticism a philosophy, Wilde answered:

> [m]ost certainly it is a philosophy. It is the study of what may be found in art. It is the pursuit of the secret of life. Whatever there is in all art that represents the eternal truth, is an expression of the great underlying truth. So far aestheticism may be held to be the study of truth in art (qtd in HAMILTON, 1882, p. 111).

Thus, even before the publication of his critical writings, Wilde emerged as a prominent figure in relation to the Aesthetic Movement, for he had already started producing some of the thoughts he was to develop later in his articles. Nonetheless, in this interview it is possible to distinguish a major difference from the thoughts he was to develop later: instead of saying that aestheticism was the philosophy of beauty, Wilde declared it was the study of truth in art. In subsequent years, Wilde started supporting the idea of the inexistence of a single and universal truth: the element capable of lending universality to art was beauty, but beauty was said to have different and varied forms. Thus, Wilde revaluated his ideas over the years, and the idea of truth in art was replaced by the idea of the truth(s) of beauty in art, since beauty is the secret every work of art holds.

When Wilde finally published *Intentions*, in 1891, he had already published the essays of the book separately, between 1885 and 1890. Most reviews that appeared in newspapers and magazines at the time praised positive aspects of his critical writings, and, even though some of them were unsigned, the critics were almost unanimous in saying that, despite Wilde‘s mannerisms and paradoxes, he showed he had something to teach in terms of literary criticism. Invariably, most critics also referred to Wilde as Pater‘s disciple, although Arthur Symons recognized that ‗when he is most himself – an artist in epigram – he can be admirable even when his eloquence reminds us of the eloquence writing of others‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 96).

Twelve years after Wilde‘s death, Arthur Ransome published a book in which he discussed the precursors of Wilde in relation to his aesthetics. In *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912), Ransome considers a connection between Kantian and Wildean aesthetics, as he argues that there are some ideas borrowed from Kant in ‗The Decay of Lying‘, especially when Wilde makes some statements about the uselessness of art:

> [t]he public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are

> interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art. The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art (WILDE, 2003, p. 1077).

Wilde's point of view is that Nature should not be represented in art, for it is not a subject worthy of being embodied. In fact, when he claims that art should deal only with matters that do not concern us, he discards nature, morality and utilitarianism not only as criteria for works of art assessment, but also as topics for the content of an artist's work. According to Ransome, these words echo

> Immanuel Kant, who, writing in 1790, said that what is called beautiful is the object of a delight apart from any interest, and showed that charm, or intimate references to our own circumstances or possible circumstances, so far from being a criterion of beauty, was a disturbing influence upon our judgment (RANSOME, 1912, p. 110-11).

For Ransome, the cult of beauty turned to aesthetic fruition proposed by Kant is similar to Wilde's view that art should not be analysed according to utilitarian or moralistic criteria. Evidently this view can also be associated with a critical perspective in which aestheticism rises as an antibourgeois reaction against a utilitarian culture, and it is necessary to give due importance to the critics who support this point of view. One of them is Gene Bell-Villada (1986), who maintains that the origin of the doctrine of _art for art's sake' is due to the capitalisation and massification of the publishing industry. Because of that, the poets who could not produce in large scale – and at this point Bell-Villada makes an exception for Victor Hugo and Lord Byron – created this doctrine as a means of justifying the existence, or subsistence, of their works.

Nevertheless, Wildean Aestheticism cannot be regarded only as an ideological response to societal pressure since there are more facts at issue. Wilde's aesthetic ideas are a combination of several and diverse aesthetics. In Wilde, it is not possible to discuss a single view of Aestheticism, for his ideas are formed from the amalgamation of different theoretical perspectives. Wilde's aesthetic plurality is also attributable to the fact that he does not explicitly define some concepts, such as beauty or truth, which results in numerous possibilities of interpretation. Due to the fact that Wilde leaves many possibilities open, there are varied perceptions of the way his works can be analysed, and each of them can be regarded as aesthetic. In fact, what is proposed here

is to see that Wildean Aestheticism works as a two-way street, for the reason that all artistic work created in the Aesthetic Movement are to some extent critical, whereas all critical works which either aim to interpret or help to establish Wilde‘s works are in some way aesthetic. Actually, the sources Wilde used to develop his thoughts received an aesthetic bias through his hands, for Wilde was able to aestheticise the ideas he worked with, so that he would make them his own. Therefore, all works cited as part of the foundation for Wilde‘s views are henceforth seen as the inception for different aesthetic perspectives to come.

Teophile Gautier, a writer from the Romantic School, is one the authors pointed out as a source to Wilde‘s writings. As mentioned earlier, Gautier is seen by some critics as a key figure in the development of an autonomous aesthetic. Peter Raby regards him as an ‗inspiring model‘, as well as one of the main precursors to Wilde‘s critical thoughts. In *Oscar Wilde*, Raby declares that,

> Gautier prefigured Wilde […]. From him, either directly or through the reflections of Gautier‘s successors – Flaubert, Baudelaire, Pater – Wilde absorbed the idea of the primacy of art, and the artist‘s sacred obligation to achieve mastery of his craft and materials. From him, especially, he acquired the impulse to make language function in the same way as pigment and stone (1988, p. 36).

Raby‘s commentary touches on two points: one is that of Wilde‘s precursors, for Raby considers that Wilde absorbed Gautier‘s ideas directly or indirectly via other writers, and the other is that of the way these precursors played an important role in Wilde‘s decision to work with accuracy and perfection with the tools he had at his disposal. For Wilde, as a writer, the consequence of this decision is the quest for mastery when dealing with language, as he uses it accurately to achieve his goals, not only as a critic, but also as an artist.

Raby also comments that Whistler was the mediator between Baudelaire‘s ideas and those of Wilde, but Wilde‘s greater debt is to Flaubert, to whom Wilde owed his concept of the position of the artist in relation to his literary works, which Wilde would develop better in ‗The Critic as Artist‘. In fact, Raby is not the only critic to see some analogies between the ideas of the Symbolist contemporaries and those of Wilde. Arthur Ransome argues that,

> [w]e shall, perhaps, be better able to understand the first period of Wilde‘s public prominence, if we examine the origins of the movement of which, by accident and inclination, he became the accepted protagonist. Continental critics have noticed in his writings theories so closely analogous to those of the French Symbolists that

> they find it difficult not to believe that he was a disciple of that school, and, as it were, an English representative of Mallarmé‘s salon in the Rue de Rome. It is true that, like the Symbolists, he sought intensity in art, and emphasis of its potential at the expense of its kinetic qualities (1912, p. 60-1).

Remarkably, Ransome associates Symbolist poets with the *first period of Wilde's public prominence*, which is the one mentioned by Hamilton: the period when Wilde lectured all over the United States and Canada, which was prior to his critical writings.

Ransome also points out that Wilde was the protagonist of Aesthetic Movement *by accident and inclination*, which means to say that not only was he in the right place at the right time, but also that he had a tendency to over-dramatise some aesthetic ideas in his way of speaking and dressing, which may have led to his success as a conversationalist as well as a lecturer. It was because of his *aesthetic persona* that Wilde became a target for the critics of Aestheticism, his figure being frequently cartooned in the satirical magazine *Punch*. In fact, Wilde was invited to lecture in the United States and Canada in order to enlighten North Americans about the English Aesthetic Movement so that they would be able to understand and laugh at the comic opera *Patience*, which ridiculed the Aesthetic Movement. Wilde was thus indirectly promoting the popularisation of a satire of the very movement he would later help to establish.

Some critics also point to Wilde‘s indebtedness to Decadent writers, as Stephen Calloway does:

> [f]or Wilde, [...] true aesthetes had ‗slim gift souls‘. Increasingly, the closely related desires for rarefied experience and the attainment of subtle discrimination, as displayed for example in artistic connoisseurship, became, along with an obsession for form and style, the central ideas of the English Decadent writers, poets and artists (2009, p. 44).

In fact, the Decadent writers were a group of artists composed of Symbolist writers along with the later generation of poets of the Aesthetic Movement. The name of the group is due to the freedom of some members‘ morals. In an epoch as strict in terms of morality as it was the Victorian Era, to be morally loose was considered to be decadent. In relating Wilde to Decadent artists, Calloway‘s claim is that Wilde employed their ideas of form and style, and later expanded them in his article ‗The Critic as Artist‘. Nonetheless, Wilde‘s debt to the Decadents is not only related to their ideas of form and style, which he incorporated, but also to the use he made of the figure of the dandy, which was predominantly a Decadent character.

After the publication of *Intentions*, which marked the beginning of what could be called his second period, Wilde became widely associated with Victorian thinkers, such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Henry Newman, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold. Julia Prewitt Brown is one of the critics who emphasise Wilde‘s debt to Victorian thinkers, especially when it comes to the distinction between *art* and *life*:

> [i]t is a mark of Wilde‘s slipperiness, but also of his sanity, that those key words art and life are simultaneously linked and counter-posed. This equivocation, moreover, is a consequence of Wilde‘s debt to his predecessors: nearly all the great Victorian prose writers who came before Wilde – Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Henry Newman, John Stuart Mill, and Matthew Arnold – were caught in a dualism that, however different the language in which it is cast, entailed a disabling opposition between an aesthetic principle and an ethical one (BROWN, 1997, p. 3).

Brown‘s point of view is shared by Anne Varty, who also mentions Matthew Arnold as Wilde‘s precursor. She reminds us that the original title of Wilde‘s essay ‗The Critic as Artist‘ was ‗The True Function and Value of Criticism: with some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing‘ and it refers directly to Arnold‘s essay ‗The Function of Criticism at the Present Time‘, in which Arnold had announced criticism is ‗the endeavour… to see the object as in itself it really is‘ (ARNOLD, 1962, p. 258 apud VARTY, 1998, p. 56). Yet, Varty clarifies that Wilde only retrieves Arnold‘s ideas in order to deviate from them afterwards. This may be proved in Wilde‘s own text, as he claims that ‗[…] it has been said […] that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. But this is a very serious error‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1126), and he adds that ‗the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1128). Thus, Arnold may be considered an important source for Wilde, as Wilde used Arnold‘s ideas as a starting-point for the development of his own.

In fact, Julia Prewitt Brown believes that Wilde is much more indebted to Arnold and those precursors she mentions, than to Walter Pater himself:

> Wilde is much closer to the thought of these writers, even as he advances beyond them into new philosophical territory, than he is to that of his most frequently cited predecessor, Walter Pater. For Pater completely collapsed the distinction between ―art‖ and ―life‖ when, in his famous conclusion to *The Renaissance*, he placed art in the domain of sensations (1997, p. 3).

According to Brown, even Pater claimed that Wilde was truly Arnold‘s heir, since Wilde largely used Arnold‘s metaphor of *sweetness*[6] as a concept corresponding to the aesthetic precept of loving beauty for its own sake – and that is exactly the most significant aesthetic doctrine in the context of the distinction between aesthetics and ethics promoted in the Aesthetic Movement.

Po Fang (2004) also presents his vision of the definition of aesthetic feeling for Pater and Wilde, and argues that, for Pater, the aesthetic experience is related to release from social pressures, while, for Wilde, it is associated with both political protest and ostentation:

> Pater [...], in his portraits of various Renaissance figures [...] presents the aesthetic sentiment mainly as a revitalizing or revolutionary force that emancipates the heart, expands the mind, awakens the senses, and liberates the reason from the austere restrictions imposed on the individuals by religion, politics, and social norms through the centuries. Wilde, by contrast, […] turns his aesthetic stance into a powerful, double-edged weapon both as a protest against the confining bourgeois ideology of his age and as a strategy for brilliant self-display (p. 182-3).

Evidently, Po Fang emphasises that the degree of distancing between morals and art occurs differently in each one of them. Whereas, for Pater, aesthetics were able to touch the viewer, promoting wonder and marvel and intensifying his/her experience of life, for Wilde, aesthetics were not only a means of achieving delightful impressions of beauty, but also an instrument through which he could express his personae and criticise the imposed standards. Actually, as far as it goes, when Wilde criticises established principles – whether they are social, politic or artistic – he is expressing one of his multiple personae. In other words, he is wearing one of those masks that reveal his truths.

Jonathan Freedman‘s perception in the introduction to the book he edited, *Oscar Wilde – A Collection of Critical Essays* (1996), is a more balanced one when it comes to Wilde‘s precursors, as he states that some roots of Wildean aesthetics are to be found in Pater‘s works, while others are in Arnold‘s. Nonetheless, he is confident that Wilde reworked their ideas and transformed them into something of his own:

> [a]sserting the priority of the interpreted over the natural and of the imaginative critic over the minutely faithful one, Wilde argued that criticism is as creative a form as the art it seeks to assess, and that the

[6] Matthew Arnold used the expression ‗Sweetness and Light‘ as the title of the first section of his 1869 book *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, in which ‗sweetness and light‘ stands for beauty and intelligence, respectively. Both beauty and intelligence are seen as the two key components of an excellent culture.

> critic‘s touching will to read the world in Arnoldian clarity and forthrightness was best diverted to an appreciation of the role language plays in establishing social, cultural, and imaginative production. As such, Wilde seems to have anticipated many of the doctrines of contemporary literary theory. Roland Barthes, for example, may be read as a deeply Wildean critic, one who both constructed and interpreted himself under the sign of textual desire. Wildean as well are the arguments [...] for the creative aspects of the critical act. And Wilde‘s work anticipates [...] many of the central tenets of both deconstruction and analytic philosophy (p. 5-6).

So, Freedman not only presents the origins of Wildean aesthetics, but goes further and outlines the subsequent literary theories which are indebted to him. In the same way that Wilde took other people‘s ideas as a starting-point for his own, his works also formed the basis for other critics‘ writing.

Wilde absorbed ideas from many different sources, but he altered them, transforming them for his own benefit and creating his own singular aesthetics. Raby (1988) declares that ‗Wilde [...] acquired many ‗voiœs‘, personae and masks, which enabled him to operate across a wide range of tones‘ (p. 6). As a kaleidoscope of thoughts, ‗Wilde‘s new version of the old aestheticism‘ (DANSON, 2009, p. 85) is the result of merging diverse aspects of different approaches, attitudes and techniques, which makes his aesthetics enriching and unique.

All the above-mentioned philosophers, theorists and artists who gave support to the ideas which subsequently became doctrines of Aesthetic Movement contributed to the formation and consolidation of the process which lead to this artistic movement.

2.4 Oscar Wilde: Aesthetic disciple

Before dealing with Oscar Wilde‘s essays, it is necessary to explain how the ideas presented in his texts are going to be addressed. First of all, two of the four essays published in *Intentions* were written as dialogues between characters. For this reason, opinions registered in those texts could be considered as those of the characters rather than Wilde‘s. On the other hand, the authorial stance can be identified in the characters‘ opinions and hence it can be recognised in the text. Due to these factors, this study is based on two propositions: the first is the concept of *dialogism*, proposed by the circle of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Volosinov, according to which

> [d]ialogue, in the narrow sense of the term, is, of course, only one of the forms [...] of verbal interaction. But dialogue can also be understood in a broader sense, meaning not only direct, face-to-face

> vocalized verbal communication between persons, but verbal communication of any type whatsoever. A book, i.e., *a verbal performance in print*, is also an element of verbal communication. It is something discussable in actual, real-life dialogue, but aside from that, it is calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized, *printed* reaction in the various forms devised by the particular sphere of verbal communication in question (VOLOSINOV, 1973, p. 95).

From this perspective, dialogue occurs in language and may take place in any form of speech. Thus, dialogue can be seen as an interaction between interlocutors. For this reason, Wilde's essays will be considered as texts presenting dialogues on two levels: the first is the dialogue between the characters; the second is the dialogue between the author and his readers, whose message is the literary text's very materiality.

The second proposition refers to the following extract from Wilde's essay "The Critic as Artist', in which he justifies his choice of dialogue as a means of criticism:

> [n]or, again, is the critic really limited to the subjective form of expression. The method of the drama is his, as well as the method of the epos. He may use dialogue […] or adopt narration […] [and] present to us under the fanciful guise of fiction, some fine and exquisite piece of criticism […]. Dialogue [...] can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance (WILDE, 2003, p. 1143).

For Wilde, dialogue is not only the richest means of expression, full of possibilities for the manifestation of the critic's ideas, but also a mask of fiction worn as a way of subtly stating his thoughts. In this respect, Peter Raby in his book, *Oscar Wilde* (1988), declares that "[t]he modern Socratic dialogue is a highly suitable form for Wilde. It enables him to be both fanciful and serious: "underneath the fanciful form it hides some truths, or perhaps some half-truths, about art, which I think require to be put forward"' (WILDE, 1966 apud RABY, 1988, p. 41).

Both Raby and Anne Varty – who argues that the form used by Wilde is derived from Plato – emphasise the advantages of using dialogue as a mode of criticism. They point out that the Socratic dialogues – which were actually written by Plato, as Socrates himself did not leave anything written – became a genre of literary works in prose in

which characters discuss moral and philosophical questions. Among the characters there is always a master and some disciples, who are required to answer questions the master asks them. Focusing on the disciple‘s answers, the master shows them their ignorance about the issue discussed, in order to help them to create knowledge by systematically arranging their ideas. Through the characters, then, the author is enabled to express his thoughts and ideas, for he is able to manipulate the dialogue in his favour. This is exactly what Wilde does in his own dialogues: there are two characters in each of them, and one of these characters is always asking the other questions. The answers of the second character are not considered to be correct. As a result, the same character who asked the question is the one who provides the truthful answer.

Thus, the perspective adopted in this thesis regarding the analysis of the substance of Wilde‘s dialogues will be the same as that assumed in _The Critic as Artist‘: a dialogue is seen as a means for the critic to express his opinion, even though he does so through the voices of his characters. For this reason, hereinafter, all quotations from Wilde‘s essays will be taken to represent Oscar Wilde‘s own ideas and opinions.

2.4.1 ‘The Decay of Lying: An Observation’

_The Decay of Lying‘ starts with a dialogue between the characters Cyril and Vivian, in which there is a discussion about an essay Vivian is writing. In Vivian‘s article, entitled _The Decay of Lying: A Protest‘, Vivian argues in favour of four doctrines which come to be the new aesthetics proposed by Wilde, and which are essentially those of the Aesthetic Movement itself. It may therefore be seen that the essay serves as an exposition of Wilde‘s perspective on this artistic movement.

At the outset of the essay, Wilde, through his character Vivian, defines the term by asking: _After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1072). He stresses that the lie he is talking about is not the habitual lie told by politicians, for they _never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind!‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1072). He goes on to assert that what he is pleading for is _Lying in art‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1072). Wilde‘s lie is not restricted by any kind of rule regarding veracity: a fine liar has the ability to create

fanciful stories with the freedom of imagination, in which there are no limits as to utilitarianism or morals.

Wilde creates a parallel between art and lie in the first paragraph of Vivian‘s essay: _One of the chief causes that can be assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of Lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1073). Thus lying – in addition to being considered a science and a social pleasure – is now understood to be an art; hence, *a priori*, Wilde‘s essay addresses the decadence of art.

Through Vivian‘s statements Wilde goes on to set out the four doctrines of the new aesthetics he proposes. The first of these is that _[a]rt never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1087). Wilde advocates the independence of art, not only in terms of form, but also in terms of content. Art develops its own lines of thought in any suitable form.

Indeed, according to Wilde, art shall express only itself, for _Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1082). Through this assertion, Wilde rejects the standard criterion of art criticism, based on the utilitarian value of art. With regard to utilitarianism, Wilde declares that _[t]he only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1091). According to this view, the very utility of a thing is contrary to Wilde‘s notion of beauty: a beautiful object has already fulfilled its aim of being beautiful, which is its ultimate goal, and therefore no longer aspires to be anything else. Based on this statement, it is also possible to understand that art shall neither be symbolic of any external event, nor imitate any world standardisation:

> [a]fter all, what the imitative arts really give us are merely the various styles of particular artists, or of certain schools of artists. […] No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist. [...] The fact is that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art, and art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth. […] It is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style (WILDE, 2003, p. 1088).

There are two implicit perspectives in this assertion: the first one refers to the function of art. Although it is not specified, the function of art can be apprehended based on what

is not its purpose: imitating life and nature and expressing the artist‘s time. So, the role of art is always turned in upon itself – *Art for art’s sake*, as the Aestheticians would claim. The second perspective refers to the role of style, for truth is dependent on style; hence, truth is assigned to it. Style is the singularity in the artist‘s manner of expression, for truth is related to each artist‘s unique form of expression. In other words, the artist depends on his means of expressing himself if he is to expose an illusion of truth which should convince his spectators/interlocutors/readers of the veracity of his art. Therefore, the function of style is verisimilitude, not in the sense of the probability of being true in the external world – because it would be inconsistent to say that art has verisimilitude with the real world, especially when Wilde rejects the idea of art being imitative – but rather in the sense of plausibility in the inner coherence of a work of art. So, any artistic work should have its own logic, which would make it reliable, consistent, and credible.

As art shall not be imitative, it cannot imitate nature. Actually, at the beginning of the text, Wilde declares that nature is inferior to art, for it does not present the same possibilities of perfection: _Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1071). Through lies, the powerful ability to work through imagination, everything becomes possible in art, whereas, in nature, this does not happen: nature follows rules which art chooses to ignore.

With regard to the differences between art and nature, Wilde clarifies that nature is the creation of the artist, for the way nature is seen is related to the methods the artist has chosen to represent it. According to Wilde,

> [n]ature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence (WILDE, 2003, p. 1086).

In Wilde‘s conception, both nature and life are inferior to art and neither the expression of life nor of nature is suitable for art. Another remarkable point is that of the difference between looking and seeing: whereas looking supposes turning one‘s attention to an object, seeing implies grasping its comprehension as well as experiencing it. Beauty is the one characteristic in a work of art capable of causing a deep impression on its beholder, as Pater had already clarified, and those impressions form the observer‘s meaningful perception. Beauty enables the viewer to see what he was hitherto only looking at.

In fact, returning art to nature makes art imperfect, as Wilde points out in his second doctrine: _All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1091). He had already declared this when he stated: _[…] wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our work has always become vulgar, common and uninteresting‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1080). It is implicit in this assertion that the duty of art is to be returned to beautiful and interesting things, in order to express only itself.

In this regard, Wilde adds: _Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is this, more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr Pater dwells, that makes music the type of all the arts‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1087). When Wilde states that, rather than the correlation between form and substance, it is the autonomy of art that makes music a high art, he is rectifying Pater‘s claim, inasmuch as he is saying that music, as the type of all arts, does not seek for external material to be conceived: its content consists only of itself. The connection between form and substance is then already implied, because, when art expresses itself, it uses its own materials and forms. As a result, this connection is seen as secondary.

Wilde‘s concept of art is that it is independent, free and autonomous. Art does not need any external standard to be creative; art is creative in its whole existence. Therefore, it should not be imitative, as, for Wilde, art does not imitate, but is rather imitated. Art creates the archetypes which will subsequently be copied throughout the external world. The third doctrine of the essay is placed in that light:

> [l]ife imitates art far more than Art imitates life. […] And it has always been so. A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher. […] Life gains from art not merely spirituality, depth of thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art […] For this, Art is required, and the true disciples of the great artist are not his studio-imitators, but those who become like his works of art, be they plastic as in Greek days, or pictorial as in modern times; in a word, Life is Art‘s best, Art‘s only pupil (WILDE, 2003, p. 1082-3).

Although this idea may sound paradoxical, its seeming contradiction is dissipated by the fact that art takes life as part of its materials in order to recycle and recreate it, lending beauty to it through new shapes and forms, so that art fascinates life and the latter starts imitating the former. Wilde conveys the idea that human beings are so deeply touched by artistically created beauty that they are no longer content just to admire it, they are

also willing to incorporate it into their lives, that is, displeased by the reality of the facts of life, they wish to have the fascinating world of art to themselves, for that is where everything becomes possible.

Finally, the last aesthetic doctrine proposed by Wilde in ‗The Decay of Lying' refers to the very purpose of art, which is the disclosure of beautiful lies. This last precept is directly connected to the former principles, that is, art influences life when, taking its materials, Art recreates them in an absolutely fabulous, delightful and, *a priori*, inventive way. Furthermore, as the purpose of art is not to tell the truth – such is the aim of style – and as art shall express itself and it should not imitate or express the external world, then art shall account for the beauty of its inventions, all of which are unreal and illusory.

Based on this last doctrine and considering the title of Wilde's essay, it is possible to infer that, for Wilde, art is in decline. Since art's purpose is telling beautiful lies and lying is in decadence, the function of art lies in nothingness. Nevertheless, Wilde's main point is focused on the third doctrine of the essay, as he argues that,

> [l]ife imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy. It is a theory that has never been put forward before, but it is extremely fruitful, and throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art (WILDE, 2003, p. 1091).

When Wilde declares that, through its beautiful forms, art may realise the energy of self-expression, he is taking his considerations of form and substance to another level. Therefore, content can be considered to be embedded in form. Insofar as form is responsible for expression, art's raw materials turn out to reside in its structure. Form and substance are so amalgamated, that they become a single entity and art's essence is placed within its design.

2.4.2 'The Critic as Artist'

This essay consists of a dialogue between two characters, Gilbert and Ernest, and it is divided into two parts, entitled, respectively, ‗With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing' and ‗With some remarks upon the importance of discussing everything'.

At the outset of the first part, Wilde, through the voice of Gilbert, vociferates against utilitarianism in art: _I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood. Don‘t degrade me into the position of giving you useful information‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1114). From Wilde‘s point of view, art is so superior that it does not need to be useful. Its importance is higher than utility, for it is focused on beauty. Thus, any function other than beauty would demean art‘s significance. Regarding utilitarianism in art, Julia Prewitt Brown clarifies that

> [a]rt is —useless" because, in a pervasively utilitarian society, it must be in order to endure; otherwise it becomes grist for the bourgeois moral order, as the hack reviewers and members of the —police-court of literature" would have it be. If it is to do its work, it must be in some measure out of reach (1997, p. 111).

In Varty‘s interpretation, utilitarianism is considered a threat to the endurance of imaginative art. As art is superior to everything else, it is above questions of usefulness, and its survival is precisely tied to that feature of worthlessness.

Gilbert and Ernest go on to discuss the value of art criticism, enabling Wilde to ponder whether the work of the critic is a work of art. His first argument in favour of this idea is that _[a]ll fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate [...] and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1118). So he rejects the idea of the existence of art without criticism, _[f]or it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1119). Wilde‘s arguments seem to favour criticism, that is, he seems to be arguing that criticism is superior to the artistic work:

> [c]riticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent. […] The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world. […] Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation. Nay, more, I would say that the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end (2003, p. 1124-5).

According to Wilde, although criticism and the work of art may be seen as equivalent concerning the critic‘s and the artist‘s positioning in society as well as the autonomy of

both, criticism is superior to works of art, regarding both the effort employed by the critic and the raw material it is based on. In other words, the critic‘s work is his interpretation, which is based upon a work of art. Accordingly, the critic is supposed to attribute meaning to his impressions of beauty, and they can be as varied as his moods, for criticism is entirely subjective, ―being the purest form of personal impression‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1125). On the topic of subjective criticism, Wilde asserts that

> [c]riticism‘s most perfect form [...] is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely. […] It treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself […] to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age […] (WILDE, 2003, p. 1126-7).

In addition to confirming the subjectivity of criticism, Wilde also reflects on the function of criticism. Although he does not state what this function is, he exposes what it is not: discovering the artist‘s real intention when executing his work of art. He goes on to point out that the meaning of a work of art is conveyed not only by the artist himself, but also by the spectator, for he lends the work of art its countless meanings. Wilde‘s assertion can be seen as foreshadowing Reception Theory, as proposed by Hans Robert Jauss in the late 1960s, in which the reader‘s role is enhanced, and the reader‘s responsibility is completing the meanings of a text, in order to finish the communication process initiated by the author. Therefore, the reader establishes the nexus and boundaries required for an understanding of the linguistic object. Nonetheless, according to Brown, Wilde‘s emphasis on reception is actually derived from Kant:

> [i]t was Kant who decisively introduced the spectator into the concept of aesthetics, and we see Kant‘s influence on Wilde in this emphasis on reception, or creative reception. […] In ―The Critic as Artist‖, Wilde would develop the Kantian theory of reception to the point where the creative and the critical faculties, the artist and the spectator, are no longer opposed but vitally dependent on one another (1997, p. 72-3).

Like Kant, Wilde places the reader as creator, mainly because he claims it is incumbent on the reader to lend meaning to a literary work. However, as readers do that, they fill the work of art with meanings which please them, for it is not possible to fully control their reception, and it is impossible to ascertain if the readers‘ comprehension is the

same as that conjectured by the author at the moment of conception of the text. Furthermore, Wilde was conscious of the fact that language expresses countless other meanings besides the one the author initially intended, and those meanings are just as valid to an understanding of the text as those consciously intended by the author. For these reasons, Wilde did not believe the critic‘s role was to find out the artist‘s real intention when creating his work of art.

In this respect, Brown asserts that the aesthetic critic is not passive. Instead, his role is to interpret the meanings of the work of art rather than receiving them as if they were already given as complete:

> [t]he aesthetic state in Wilde, or more precisely the state of aesthetic reception, is not one in which the mind is merely a tabula rasa that registers without any selection or refraction. As is made clear in ―The Critic as Artist", the aesthetically receptive critic, rather than passive, has a particular temperament, one that is not dominated by reason but itself shapes (1997, p. 98).

For her, the critic‘s reception of a work of art is aesthetic, for the unravelling of its secret is dependent on him. Wilde emphasises that this type of criticism _[...] is the highest Criticism, for it criticises not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself, and fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1127). As the critic is the one who will convey to the public the unveiling of the mysteries of beauty in the work of art, which are possibly distinct from the intentions of the artist, the meaning of the work of art also belongs to him.

At the end of the first part of the essay, Wilde also addresses the problem of unity of art. Contrary to Pater, who places music as the highest form of art, Wilde solves the question of art unity by raising literature to the level of highest art:

> […] the critic reproduces the work that he criticises in a mode that is never imitative, and part of whose charm may really consist in the rejection of resemblance, and shows us in this way not merely the meaning but also the mystery of Beauty, and, by transforming each art into literature, solves once for all the problem of Art‘s unity (WILDE, 2003, p. 1129).

Wilde includes among the critic‘s characteristics the ability to solve the problem of art‘s unity, and the key to this problem is found in the fact that criticism has a literary form which unifies all forms of art into one. As all kinds of critical reviews are written, literary forms are employed by all critics of art, whether art comes in the form of music, painting, writing, dance or theatre.

Although Wilde praises Greek art criticism throughout the essay, when he declares that criticism is not imitative, he distances himself from Plato and Aristotle, as both philosophers corroborated in the creation of the concept of *mimesis*, which defines art as imitative in relation to nature and the real world. Actually, for Plato, a dramatic work is an illusory art which reflects the world of surfaces that surrounds the writer. The mimetic creation does not imitate the World of Ideas, but the sensible appearance of it; hence it works through illusions. Aristotle, in his turn, claims that mimesis does not apply to the World of Ideas, but deals with human actions regarding possible interpretations of the real. For him, art is the product of the imitation of both nature and the human actions, although his concern is not confined to the idea of representativeness, since a copy demands the development of an ordering operation. R. V. Johnson points out the main difference between the Aristotelian concept and its reappearance in the tenets of Aestheticism:

> Aristotle recognized that the poet selects from the facts of experience, keeping only those which are relevant to his purpose. He presents some general truth, stripped of the accidental circumstances that obscure it in actual life. Thus Aristotle argues that, although (or because) poetry is not a mechanical repetition of life, it may convey general truth. The poet gives us an ordered vision [...]; but it is a vision in which some aspect of experience is heightened and illuminated. Where the aesthetic standpoint differs is in stressing the difference between art and life, while ignoring or denying the capacity of art to give particular embodiment to general truth. The realm of imagination is not merely different from actuality: it does not refer back to it in any way. We value a poem, play or novel, not because of its ordered rendering of truth but precisely *because* it constitutes a fictive world other – even better – than the actual world (JOHNSON, 1969, p. 39-40).

Although one may recall that early in his career Wilde defined Aestheticism as the ‗study of truth in art' (qtd in HAMILTON, 1882, p. 111), it is important to bear in mind that he widened his ideas once he understood that there was more than one single or universal truth in art. It is also remarkable that Pater, Wilde's main master, had his own conception of truth in art. For Pater, the truth of a work of art is the writer's reconciliation of his perception with his style, and this adjustment results in the work's beauty. The Aristotelian concept of truth and that held by Aesthetic philosophers also differ from each other. Whereas the first is related to reality, the latter is associated with beauty. In fact, Wilde ends up by embracing a conception of truth as contradiction in ‗The Truth of Masks', and Aestheticism turns out to be considered as the philosophy of beauty in art. Each work of art is then seen as able to create its own truth, for it creates a

universe apart from the real. As a consequence, the binary opposition that arose in Aestheticism between art and life ends with art being appreciated over life precisely because art creates an imaginative world that is seen as better, and even more utterly perfect, than the real one.

In the second part of the essay, Wilde compares art and life, concluding that art is much superior to life. In art, all types of imaginative feelings can rise to the surface by means of the relation between the spectator and the work of art, and these feelings can be perceived every time one experiences a work of art. The same does not happen in life, for one of its characteristics is the non-repetition of past events. Wilde goes further and states that art must be appealed to for everything, since art is incapable of hurting because the feelings it awakens are able to purify its spectators. It is therefore possible to conclude that, through art, the effect that Aristotle considered tragedy could produce on the spectator, also known as *catharsis*, can be achieved.

Wilde had already referred to catharsis in the first part of the essay, when he commented on it as it is mentioned in *Poetics*, by Aristotle:

> [...] think merely of one perfect little work of aesthetic criticism, Aristotle‘s Treatise on Poetry. It is not perfect in form, for it is badly written, consisting perhaps of notes dotted down for an art lecture, or of isolated fragments destined for some larger book, but in temper and treatment it is perfect, absolutely. [...] here we have art treated, not from the moral, but from the purely aesthetic point of view. […] That purification and spiritualising of the nature which he calls catharsis is [...] essentially aesthetic, and is not moral [...] (WILDE, 2003, p. 1116).

Once more Wilde transforms his source through interpretation, since he understands catharsis to be an aesthetic rather than a moral experience. He insists on the split between art and morals, as for him, ‗[a]ll art is immoral. [...] For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1136). For Wilde, works of art are supposed to provoke emotions that shall be entirely experienced in order to widen the senses. The purpose of works of art is not to enhance proper behaviour or any kind of moral conduct, since art belongs to the sphere of aesthetics, whereas life belongs to the sphere of ethics. Wilde goes beyond a simple separation between aesthetics and ethics. For him, aesthetics supplants ethics, since the role attributed to beauty is superior to all:

> Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we

> can arrive. Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong. Aesthetics, in fact, are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change (WILDE, 2003, p. 1154).

Thus, although aesthetics is placed higher than ethics, it does not replace ethics. Indeed, when Wilde draws parallels between natural selection and ethics, and sexual selection and aesthetics, he correlates them, in a way that makes it possible to glimpse a contradiction in his text, as he had previously stated that aesthetics and ethics belong to completely separate spheres. Brown shares this opinion:

> [w]ithout the aesthetic, then, there can be no ―higher ethics" […], because it is from the aesthetic that the power to progress derives […]. Wilde says that love of beauty itself is the beginning and end of all education: all efforts to deny aesthetics its proper role in the ethical realm will result in the deterioration of the ethical life of man (1997, p. 55).

Brown sees a dependent connection between these two concepts, as she claims aesthetics has a place in the realm of ethics. Nonetheless, the dependence of ethics on aesthetics is deeper, because, whereas ethics makes existence possible, aesthetics is responsible for its progress, hence the scope of ethics is subject to aesthetics.

Wilde finally goes on to consider the qualities of the true critic. He disagrees with the notion that the critic is fair, rational and sincere: one can only be fair about something one is not interested in and, as art is a passion, any thought about art is directly connected to emotion. Wilde also argues that art does not create inspiration; it rather comes from inspiration: as there is nothing rational in the cult of beauty, art cannot be related to reason. He is also against the idea that the only possible sincerity is towards beauty. Because of that, the critic must not limit himself to a stereotyped method proposed by any literary school. Besides, Wilde clarifies that sincerity and fairness belong to the sphere of morals and therefore they are not necessary qualities when it comes to art. He declares, then, what the necessary qualities for every art critic are. According to Wilde, ‗[t]emperament is the primary requisite for the critic – a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1146). Thus, the aesthetic critic must turn himself/herself to the ideal of art, that is, beauty, and then be able to completely appreciate all feelings which it arouses. As a result, the artist will enjoy the pleasure of

having his/her mind broadened and his/her senses widened in a way that he/she will be able to fulfil what Pater defined as the purpose of art in life: ‗to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life' (PATER, 2009, p. 236).

After pondering the question of temperament, Wilde comes to that of form. As he states, ‗the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. [...] it is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under their conditions of beauty' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1149). Form is the possibility of critical temperament as well as aesthetic instinct, which are considered to be indispensable qualities for the true critic. Hence, form is the possibility of criticism.

The last relevant issue raised in the dialogue of Wilde's characters is the author's assertion concerning art criticism. Wilde claims that

> [t]he appeal of all art is simply to the artistic temperament. Art does not address herself to the specialist. Her claim is that she is universal, and that in all her manifestations she is one. Indeed, so far from its being true that the artist is the best judge of art, a really great artist can never judge of other people's work at all, and can hardly, in fact, judge of his own. That very concentration of vision that makes a man an artist, limits by its sheer intensity his faculty of fine appreciation. The energy of creation hurries him blindly on to his own goal […] It is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it […] for creation limits, while contemplation widens, the vision. […] The aesthetic critic, and the aesthetic critic alone, can appreciate all forms and modes. It is to him that Art makes her appeal (WILDE, 2003, p. 1149-50).

In this sense, the critic and the artist do not have a single artistic talent. In fact, Wilde claims that the work of the aesthetic critic is also artistic, for it creates a new work, based on a pre-existing work done by the artist himself. For this reason, the work of the artist is considered to be art in the first degree; however, the work of the critic – which uses the same materials, and does not consist of an evaluation of the artist's work, but is rather a work of art where the secrets and mysteries of the art in the first degree are unveiled, constitutes a work of art in the second degree.

2.4.3 'The Truth of Masks'

The very title of ‗The Truth of Masks' reveals that the essay deals with the essential principles of Wildean aestheticism, where there is no absolute truth, for truth can be revealed by means of masks. This concept is approached in an indirect way; the

content of the essay is related specifically to the importance of proper clothing and scenery in the creation of the illusion of an effect of truth on the stage.

In this essay, Wilde argues in favour of the use of archaeology as a form of art, that is, theatrical art, in such a way as to combine ‗the illusion of actual life with the wonder of the unreal world' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1163), in order to provide ‗the architecture and apparel suitable to the time in which the action of the play passes' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1164). He demonstrates to the reader that the perfect composition of details is necessary for the creation of the illusion of truth, which brings life to the theatre.

However, the most interesting and relevant point raised in this essay is Wilde's observation disclosing the scope of aesthetic doctrines in his literary works: ‗Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1173). For Wilde, attitude is an aesthetic doctrine to be followed. In fact, Wilde's statement refers the reader to ‗The Decay of Lying', where, as mentioned, Wilde raises lies to the category of artistic works. Thus, when he states that he entirely disagrees with much of the views put forward in the essay, he is utilising his most widely used artistic instrument: lies as revealing masks of a facet of truth.

In fact, the most interesting statements Wilde makes in this essay were added when he reviewed it before it was printed as part of his book *Intentions*. In the conclusion to the added paragraph, Wilde says that ‗A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1173). This statement refers us to ‗The Critic as Artist', where Wilde argues that criticism is the most perfect form of art, and, when he asserts that the comprehension of Platonic and Hegelian theories is subordinated to art criticism, he raises it to the level of philosophy. Besides that, when Wilde considers transcendental truths to be those revealed by means of masks, he is also raising lies, which are masked truths, to the level of philosophy. Lies may therefore be seen as the philosophy of the critic.

Therefore, in ‗The Truth of Masks', Wilde assumes a definition of truth as contradiction, and for him, opposites can only be understood together. It is in this

respect that Regina Gagnier, in her article _Creating the Audience‘, collected in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1996), claims that Wilde‘s essays are dialogic. In _The Truth of Masks‘ Wilde puts forward a point of view to then reject this very point of view, proving that, _[l]ike Bakhtin‘s –double-voiced” words, Wilde‘s epigrams and paradoxes exploit the self-critical possibilities of Victorian language and thought patterns‘ (GAGNIER, 1996, p. 68). By this means, Bakhtinian dialogism does not occur only in the dialogic structure of _The Critic as Artist‘ and _The Decay of Lying‘, but also in the substance of these and other Wildean essays, indicating once more that, in Wilde, form and substance have a relation of contiguity.

2.4.4 ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’

_Pen, Pencil and Poison – A Study in Green‘, is an essay about the work and life of the writer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1794-1847), who was arrested after being discovered to be a dangerous homicide, whose preferred method consisted of poisoning his victims. Although Wilde focuses on Wainewright, he also touches on some points about the character of art. For him, art has nothing to do with ethical virtues. According to Wilde, the fact that Wainewright was a poisoner does not reflect negatively in his prose, for the reason that art is not concerned with moral approval or disapproval.

Although many critics see Wilde‘s text as a document in support of his aesthetic vision of art, Regina Gagnier (1996) has an alternative perception of the essay, arguing that the essay can be better understood if it is seen as ironic. She emphasises that Wilde does not consider Wainwright to be an artist, for Wilde associates him with journalists. Gagnier reminds her readers of Wilde‘s negative comments on journalism in _The Critic as Artist‘, where he asserts that the existence of modern journalism is justified _by the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1114). According to Gagnier, Wilde claims the worst sin of Wainewright was not his practice of poisoning people, but his legacy to journalists. She thus interprets Wilde‘s text as a criticism of the jargon of *art for art’s sake*.

Gagnier argues that Wilde is criticising the fact that, although Aesthetic critics dissociate art and morals, they are fascinated by everything amoral, in such a way that they see Wainewright as a great writer not for his work itself, but principally for his criminal past. She states that _Wilde says that crime constitutes a large part of the

aesthetic past and that present fascination with this past indicated the conservative function of the art world‘ (1996, p. 73).

In fact, what goes unnoticed by many critics, including Gagnier, is Wilde‘s separation of aesthetics and ethics. Ethics and morals cannot function as a parameter for criticism – a work of art can be considered neither superior nor inferior as a result of its immorality. Though Wilde reiterates the idea that aesthetics and ethics belong to different realms, he reproves the fascination with immorality as a parameter for judging the quality of a work of art. In fact, Wilde‘s position is quite clear. For him, the separation between aesthetics and ethics must not be used as a pretext for qualifying immoral works as works of art, since an author should not be considered an artist simply because he is a criminal. Yet it is also true that Wilde maintains that immorality cannot be considered a restriction on the judgment of a literary work as a work of art. In that light, Wainewright cannot be considered a good or bad writer based only on his criminal history. Whether he was immoral or not, does not affect the quality of his works, for they must be evaluated based on all those aesthetic criteria which were elucidated in _The Decay of Lying‘ and _The Critic as Artist‘. Immorality is irrelevant when it comes to the qualities a work of art must possess, for art shall only express itself and reveal the secrets of its beautiful lies. Wilde does not propose to defend art for immorality‘s sake. He is rather advocating that the motto of the Aesthetic Movement, _art for art‘s sake‘, should mean exactly that art should be valued only for itself.

2.5 Resemblances and dissimilarities: comparing the precepts of Aestheticism

In order to make a comparison between Pater‘s and Wilde‘s ideas, it is necessary to summarise some of the aesthetic concepts already mentioned. The first notions shared by both writers are the concepts of _literary style‘ and _truth‘. For Pater, style is the artist‘s singularity when constructing his text in order to articulate his sense of the world. Moreover, for Pater, style is related to the transmission of truth and beauty; if it is considered that truth is the only indispensable beauty in art, and that truth is related to the artist‘s subjective expression, then truth lends beauty to style. Truth, for Pater, is _the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 10). Likewise, for Wilde, style is associated with truth, not as the veracity of external facts to art, but as verisimilitude. In other words, for Wilde, style lends the appearance of truth to literary works, that is, the artist‘s expression provides a desired illusion of truth.

Taking into account the fact that, in _The Decay of Lying‘, Wilde asserts that the purpose of art is to tell beautiful lies, it is possible to conclude that style is essential for readers to contemplate beauty in literary works, for it is style which allows the reader to believe in the illusion proposed by art.

Another point of coincidence is related to artistic conscience. For both Pater and Wilde, every artist creates his work of art in a conscious way rather than instinctively. But there is a small difference between the two writers when it comes to the manifestation of this consciousness. For Pater, artistic consciousness is derived from the choice of words that makes an artist‘s expression faithful to the idea he has in his soul, whereas, for Wilde, consciousness is a critical spirit, which also makes it possible for the work of a critic to be artistic, creative and independent of external models. Consequently, the artistic consciousness proposed by Pater is taken further by Wilde, since, for him, it is a faculty possessed by artists and critics alike.

Considering the role of the spectator, both Pater and Wilde agree that the meaning of a literary work may be completed by the reader. For Pater, the writer‘s ability to omit is a quality which makes literary works into works of art, since a literary work, in order to be considered a work of art, must have blanks of meaning to be completed by the reader; whereas, for Wilde, both the spectator and the critic have a responsibility to discover several meanings of literary works in order to reveal their beauty. The difference between Pater‘s and Wilde‘s views comes from their respective starting points. Pater starts from the point of view of the writer, while Wilde starts from the point of view of the reader, whether the reader is the critic or not. While the former declares that the blanks to be completed are left by the writer, the latter claims that literary works are the starting-point for interpretation, without mentioning any interference from the writer in the possible meanings conveyed in the literary work. This small difference brings about a greater distance between the positions of the two writers. As Wilde emphasises the role of the reader, it is noticeable that, although the writer may leave some gaps in meaning, their completion can vary infinitely, so that the writer‘s thoughts about filling these gaps may never come to the fore, just as there may be meanings not even predicted by the author of the literary work.

The concept of form also reveals similarities between the opinions of Pater and Wilde. For the former, form is related to the artist‘s style; consequently, form is the possibility of singularity which is able to take the literary work to the level of a work of art. Thus, Pater considers that the beauty of a work lies in its form. For the latter, form

is the principle both of critical temperament and aesthetic instinct. In other words, form is the *a priori* underlying principle of the work of art, since form is the possibility of criticism in the literary work; it is also through form that susceptibility to beauty occurs – which defines the critical temperament. After all, form is the means by which the beauty of art is exposed and for that reason it evokes the aesthetic instinct.

Both critics mention in their writings the word ‗temperament'. For Pater, temperament is the power to be deeply touched by beauty and for Wilde, likewise, temperament is a sensibility susceptible to beauty and to the impressions it provides. Thus, critical temperament is defined in principle by beauty. However, according to Pater, beauty is relative, and the attempts to define its abstraction are useless. Hence, the closest meaning an aesthete may have for the term is an expressive formula for the manifestations of beauty. The formula found by Pater is the fact that beauty resides both in the truth of a singular expression manifested by the artist and in the substance of this truth. Beauty therefore exists in the form as well as the substance of the artist's work. Form is related to style, whereas substance is related to art itself.

Though Wilde does not define the meaning of beauty, he relates beauty to another concept when he asserts that ‗[a]ll fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate [...] and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1118). As fine art is produced or intended primarily for beauty rather than utility, beauty in art is related to self-consciousness and also to the critical spirit, as self-consciousness lies in the critical spirit. Yet, from Wilde's perspective, the critic's first and fundamental characteristic is precisely temperament, which is in its turn related to susceptibility to beauty, that is, aesthetic fruition. Accordingly, even if it were possible to create a route of conceptual relations in order to find a definition of beauty, the end of this chain would still be beauty. Wilde does not see beauty as an autonomous concept. For him, it is inseparable from art, for beauty evokes emotion for emotion's sake, which is the aim of art.

In fact, for Wilde, beauty cannot be restricted to a single meaning, for its meanings are numerous. Even so, he mentions its role by stating that ‗[b]eauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. [...] [It is b]eauty that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1127-8). Hence, the function of beauty is to bring universality and aesthetic enjoyment to the work of art. Nonetheless, the characteristic of being universal is not related to beauty, but to the judgement of the work as a work of art. In fact, as Wilde does not

define beauty, it is impossible to consider that for him beauty would be universal. Since he states that _[b]eauty has as many meanings as man has moods‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1127), it is implied that beauty is varied and plural and therefore cannot be regarded as common or general. As the saying goes, _beauty is in the eye of the beholder‘, and, for Wilde too, beauty is subjective and individual.

The fact that Wilde tends toward the individual rather than the universal led Allison Pease (2004) to state that there is a transition from Kant to Wilde when it comes to their aesthetics: _The aesthetic process is for Wilde irrational, personal and time-bound, relative not universal. From Kant to Wilde, one can see an Enlightment faith in a universal human subjectivity yielding to a modernist/postmodernist focus on the unique, the individual not as governed by reason but by time, emotion or random circumstance‘ (2004, p. 99). As Wilde does not define beauty as a delimited concept, he leaves several aesthetic perspectives opened, and new aesthetics are consolidated from his legacy.

Actually, Allison Pease is one of the few critics to point out differences between Kant and Wilde instead of similarities. The most remarkable result of this difference – that for Wilde aesthetic is individual, whereas for Kant it is universal – is the fact that the criteria used to assess the artistic quality of a work would also be subjective, for it is beauty which lends universality as well as aesthetic fruition to the work of art. Hence, for Wilde, not only is the concept of beauty plural, but also that of art criticism.

Regarding the aim of art, Wilde‘s and Pater‘s views also converge, because Pater claims that the beauty of a literary style is in its own essence. Consequently, the aim of art is beauty. When Pater states that _[t]hose who write in good style are sometimes accused of a neglect of ideas, and of the moral end, as if the end of the physician were something else than healing, of the painter than painting – as if the end of art were not, before all else, the beautiful‘ (PATER, 2001, p. 29), he is not defending morals in art. On the contrary, he maintains that it is impossible for any critic to accuse a writer of being negligent or moralist, for, in his conception, all art has beauty as its sole and exclusive aim. Pater assumes that it is the duty of all artists to consider beauty as the utmost purpose of art. Therefore, anyone who uses art for any reason other than beauty, is not creating art. Moreover, if any critic considers that the work of an artist has a moral aim, and if it is possible for the work to be interpreted in this way, this does not necessarily entail deprecation of the work, nor of the artist. For Pater, the ultimate goal of a work of art is beauty, and once the artist has achieved this goal, any alternative reading cannot be depreciative.

Once more Wilde goes beyond the conjectures of his master, for he not only disagrees with using art with a moral purpose, but also declares that ‗all art is immoral. [...] For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1136). Although Wilde does not specifically state that art cannot be used for moralising, it is possible to infer this position based on his definition of art. When he conjectures on the true aim of art, he is defending a position which is contrary to that of Victorian society. In that light, he is criticising all uses of art for any end other than aesthetic fruition.

According to Po Fang (2004), the difference regarding morality and art, ethics and aesthetics between Pater and Wilde is even deeper, for, ‗whereas Pater interprets morality artistically, Wilde regards the ethic of the self as aesthetic fulfilment' (p. 195). For Pater, the question of morals versus art is only a matter of interpretation, while, for Wilde, it is a complete change in paradigm, for art shall never more be judged or criticised based on moral criteria: ‗[a]rt is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing. To morals belong the lower and less intellectual spheres' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1145).

In fact, when Wilde classifies the purpose of art as being different from the purpose of life, he is once more differentiating art and life, and demonstrating how life is inferior to art. At this point, his way of thinking is distanced from Pater's, as, for the latter, the characteristics of the artist's mind and soul find their architecture in the structure of human life, and an artist's work has human life as its starting point. For Wilde, neither the expression of life nor of nature lend themselves to art as objects, since both are inferior to it. In fact, according to the second aesthetic doctrine of ‗The Decay of Lying', expressing life or nature makes art imperfect.

Another concept upon which the two disagree is that of literary work. According to Pater, literary art is imitative or reproductive: ‗Literary art, that is, *like all art which is in any way imitative or reproductive* of fact [...] is the representation of such fact as connected with soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power' (PATER, 2001, p. 10, italics added). However, from Wilde's perspective, as previously mentioned, art is neither symbolic of any time, nor shall it imitate any world standardisation; thus he dismisses the concept of a reproductive work of art. Wilde recognises the duty of art to use life as raw material, but in order to recreate it, rather

than to reproduce it. Julia Prewitt Brown (1997) interprets the meanings assigned by Wilde to the words _life‘ and _art‘ as follows:

> [b]y art, Wilde means both the work of art and the aesthetic sense or potential in each of us. By life – which often appears in close proximity to the word art – Wilde means the ongoing experiences that constitute existence and, as such, contrast with the achieved stillness of artworks (1997, p. 2).

Two distinct spheres are thus created: art and life. Yet, there is an interrelation between both when the former recreates the materials of the latter, which could be seen as a contradiction, for these spheres, which are apparently distinct and impassable, touch each other. Nevertheless, the third aesthetic doctrine of _The Decay of Lying‘ must not be forgotten: _Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1082). Thus, although life imitates art, art imitates life in a smaller degree, but its imitation is not a mere reproduction, but re-creation.

In fact, the binary opposition between art and life is not present in Pater‘s works, for he only discusses the qualifying attributes of a work of art, and does not mention aesthetic doctrines, although it is possible to detect him endorsing the Aesthetic Movement in his works. Pater is distinguished from Wilde when he proposes in his text doctrines not only for the aesthetic critic, but also for human beings, that is, beauty in art must be appreciated most in life, for it is poetic passion which allows artistic contemplation.

In Wilde‘s main essays, _The Critic as Artist‘ and _The Decay of Lying‘, there are some contradictions in his dialectics. The oppositions between life and art, aesthetics and ethics, and truth and lie seem to present delimitation problems, for Wilde claims they are distinct concepts and then he presents their relation. Wilde leaves this delimitation issue unsolved, mainly due to his most commented characteristic of being a straddler. Wilde does not attempt to decide which side to take, because he is able to understand that there are more possibilities involved in leaving all options open. Nonetheless, his dialectic is compromised because it tends toward the idea that the concepts in binary opposition are actually interrelated, although art, aesthetics and lies are considered superior to life, ethics and truth respectively.

Even though Wilde does not address the issue of delimitation in the concepts of aesthetics and ethics and art and life, his notion of truth is connected to contradiction. Brown points out the similarity between Wilde‘s and Kant‘s concepts of truth:

> [m]ost serious writers at the end of the nineteenth century, especially those who, like Wilde, had read Kant, were convinced that there is no eternal or absolute truth accessible to human reason. In his "antimonies of pure reason", Kant had shown that a proposition can be "true" from one point of view […] but not from another (1997, p. 70).

Indeed, Wilde does not explore the issue deeply, for it is not his aim to discuss the nature of truth. Nevertheless, he allows his readers to conclude that he shares Kant's point of view, especially in his final assertion in "The Truth of Masks', where he makes a statement regarding the existence of various facets of the truth: "[a] truth in Art is that whose contradictory is also true' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1173). By means of Wilde's notion of truth, it is possible to see that his dialectics are founded on the idea of the truth of masks. This idea is corroborated by his assertion in "The Critic as Artist': "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1146).

Wilde does not solve the problem of contradiction, but throughout his essays he is constant in affirming that there is not a single truth. The issue of contradictory truth still resonates in the essay "The Decay of Lying', when Vivian claims that "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1081). As was stated previously, style lends beauty to the work of art; hence, truth is a matter of beauty too. As beauty is as wide-ranging as the artist's moods, truth also has varied forms. Beauty and truth become a matter of atmosphere. In "The Critic as Artist' this perception is evidenced when Gilbert states that "[t]o know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1143). Thus, every time an artist presents a different mood, he affirms another version of truth. For Wilde, truth is not related to reality, since "[t]ruth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1166), as he claims in "The Truth of Masks'. Wilde anticipates the concept of truth of modernism and post-modernism, since from the twentieth century onwards, truth starts to be seen as relative, devoid of meaning or undeserving of being pursued.

In short, Wilde takes Pater's work as a starting-point for new conjectures of his own. He is therefore consistent with his own view of the work of the critic, since, for him, "[c]riticism is itself an art' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1124), and it can also be considered to be "a creation within a creation' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1125), as the work of art is seen

_as a starting-point for a new creation‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1127). Thus, when Wilde establishes his own thoughts using Pater‘s works as a springboard he is actually doing the work of the critic as artist, since he is departing from a work of art to create a new work of art, his own criticism.

In fact, Wilde, along with Pater, founded the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement, in imprinting his own trademark on critical theory so as to make Aestheticism Wildean. Wilde was and remained a master in interpreting ideas according to his own light, and this is the reason why his Aestheticism is argued to have so many different sources. He works as a post-modernist philosopher, who constructs his thoughts based on varied foundations and brings them together to constitute a multifaceted one. Wilde‘s ideas present diverse aspects, and, although they are united in the single figure of Wilde, they do not lose their main characteristic, which is plurality.

3. Oscar Wilde's Plays

Oscar Wilde wrote seven completed plays: three tragedies and four comedies. In fact, the process of writing and publishing the plays follows an order in which the three tragedies are succeeded by the four comedies, as if Wilde had given up writing tragedies after the critical and commercial failure of his three first plays.

Although every one of Wilde‘s plays presents unique characteristics, which distinguish one from the other, there are some features which can be regarded as the author‘s trademark, since they appear in several of his plays. There are also general features of theatrical works which allow Wilde to work with tools that enrich his dramatic pieces. These theatrical characteristics are related to the structure of the plays, for drama is the artistic form chosen by Wilde to sustain his creative work. All the remaining elements that comprise the dramatic works stem from its foundation.

3.1 Structural elements: the play's foundation

There are several elements that help to structure the unity of a play. Among them, there are characters, characterisation, plot, dialogue and ultimately, language, which is the most basic raw material for any work that is produced with words. These components can have an almost infinite variety – they are established according to the author‘s decisions – and in this section, they are going to be discussed in the light of Wilde‘s choices.

Characterisation is one of the key structural elements of a play: it consists of the author‘s representation of characters on the stage or in writing, especially by imitating or describing actions, gestures, or speeches manifested both in the play‘s rehearsals and in the author‘s stage directions.

Characterisation is extremely important, since the characters support the actions of the plot and through them the dialogue is made public. Because of that, characterisation has to be consistent with the actions and speech of the characters; otherwise, the play becomes meaningless. Therefore, the characters‘ characterisation in a play, unlike other literary genres, happens especially through the character‘s actions and speech, for there is no narrator to describe their thoughts and feelings. In *An Anatomy of Drama*, Martin Esslin asserts that characterisation is better set by the characters‘ action and reaction rather than by other characters‘ speech:

> [o]ne of the most frequent mistakes made by aspiring and inexperienced playwrights is the idea that one can characterise someone in a play by having others talk about him [...]The curious fact […] is that in drama this kind of reported characterisation simply does not work. […] the real impact of the characterisation always comes from what the characters themselves do (1983, p. 39-40).

The actions performed by the characters help to differentiate one from the other and allow the audience to form an opinion about them. Wilde‘s characters are characterised both by their action and by the speech of other characters. However, the use of descriptions given by other characters evolves from Wilde‘s first play *Vera* to his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Whereas in *Vera* the descriptions given about characters reveal much about those being described, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* these descriptions are rather used as a tool to expose the describers. Therefore, from Wilde‘s first experiment on the dramatic field to his last play, Wilde learned a great deal about theatrical processes.

The author‘s directions to actors and directors in the scripts of a play can also help to establish characterisation. Nevertheless, most of Wilde‘s plays lack stage directions. In Wilde‘s dramatic works, stage directions are not plentiful, but when they appear, they are in most cases descriptions of scenery or actions that the characters perform. This lack of orientation may be assigned to the fact that Wilde participated actively in the rehearsals of his plays. According to Richard Ellman‘s biography (1988), when *Lady Windermere’s Fan* went into rehearsal in 1892, Wilde attended every day to give his suggestions, revisions and stage directions personally. Wilde is also said to have done the same with all his other plays.

One of the few exceptions is *An Ideal Husband*, since in this play Wilde gives long descriptions of each character, both in terms of physical appearance as well as traits of personality, and also of the scenery and the meaning he attributed to some of the objects that should appear in scene. Nevertheless, the audience is not informed about the stage directions and the only way the spectators can apprehend Wilde‘s purpose regarding characters and scenery is through their actions and speech. Therefore, even if the author gives guidance to the director and actors, it is the script which will carry out the author‘s purpose ultimately.

Wilde seems to have recognised that the script would play an important part in relation to the representation of the characters on the stage, for despite the great amount of stage directions he includes in *An Ideal Husband*, in all his other plays the

characterisation is achieve according to the characters‘ actions and speech. In Wilde‘s plays, what the characters mostly do is talk; hence, dialogue has an important role, for it is through dialogue that the audience gets to know aspects of the personality of each character.

Besides supporting characterisation, the dialogue also sustains the plot. However, the contrary is also true, for the firmest foundation of comedy is established in the unity between plot and dialogue. The plot, according to Esslin (1983), is constructed based on the creation of expectations:

> [t]he creation of interest and suspense (in their very widest sense) thus underlies all dramatic construction. Expectations must be aroused, but never, until the last curtain, wholly fulfilled; the action must seem to be getting nearer to the objective yet never reach it entirely before the end; and, above all, there must be constant variation of pace and rhythm, monotony of any kind being certain to lull the attention and induce boredom and somnolence (p. 43).

The structuring of the plot in such a way as to hold the audience‘s attention can be seen in all Wilde‘s plays, for expectations are aroused in each act and they are only fulfilled in the last one. Even in *Salomé*, which is a play in one act, expectations are created in a continuous rhythm to be satisfied only a few seconds before the curtain drops.

In fact, these expectations are created by a series of situations which can be unknown both by the audience and by the characters. In this respect, Martin Esslin (1983) states:

> [t]his is one of the basic devices of all drama: the audience is made to know more than the character on the stage. Or, indeed, less. If they know less than the characters, there is suspense, tension, expectation; if they know more they become deeply involved, they almost want to cry out to the characters not to act so foolishly. That is the source of a great deal of comedy (p. 73).

In Wilde‘s dramatic works this kind of resource is thoroughly utilised. Both in the tragedies and the comedies there are moments when the audience knows less than the characters, which creates a tension that helps to establish the climax. Such is the case of the end of the third act of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*: just before the curtain drops, Mrs Erlynne appears and alleges she has taken Lady Windermere‘s fan in mistake for her own. The audience creates an expectation concerning the reaction of the men, who look astonished at Mrs Erlynne‘s presence in a bachelor‘s house at night. Therefore, in the last act, the audience is apprehensive about Lady Windermere‘s situation, as at the

beginning of the act Lord Windermere has not said anything about the events of the previous night.

However, if the audience knows more than the characters, there are plenty of comic situations, and Wilde uses this resource to provoke laughter. One of the most famous scenes in which the audience knows more facts that involve the circumstances surrounding the characters‘ actions is in the second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when Jack comes to his country house wearing mourning clothes. The audience is aware of both the presence of Algernon pretending to be Jack‘s fake brother, Ernest, and Jack‘s intention to tell the people who live in his country house about his fake brother‘s death. The appearance of both Jack and Algernon in the same place at the same time with such different purposes is a source of great amusement for the audience.

The device of making the audience aware of the facts involved in the plot is used mainly in the comedies. Nonetheless, this mechanism also appears in some tragedies. This is the case of the final scene of *Vera*, for the audience knows that Vera is in the palace to kill Alexis, whereas he is ignorant of the fact. Knowing this information, the audience creates an expectation as to whether Vera will be brave enough to accomplish her mission. The fact that she is not sufficiently courageous to kill Alexis is not exactly a surprise for the public, but her decision to kill herself as an answer to the Nihilists who await her signal is the best way Wilde found out to exceed the audience‘s expectations.

Wilde worked with this resource with precision, for he knew that, depending on his choice of letting the audience know more or less about the plot, the play would have a different result in terms of meaning. In fact, in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Wilde is said to have changed the use of this resource, following his friends‘ advice and the suggestion of the producer of the play, George Alexander. After the opening night of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Wilde rewrote part of the plot _to reveal Mrs Erlynne‘s relationship to her daughter Lady Windermere by gradual degrees, instead of reserving it to the fourth act‘ (RABY, 1997, p. 144). Therefore, the tension surrounding Mrs Erlynne‘s identity is dissipated, and the public is allowed to know more than Lady Windermere about her origins.

The disclosure of the secret of Mrs Erlynne‘s relationship to Lady Windermere occurs through Mrs Erlynne‘s speech when she finds Lady Windermere‘s letter to Lord Windermere. Through Mrs Erlynne‘s monologue, the audience discovers that Lady Windermere has left her husband and child based on the belief that Mrs Erlynne is his

mistress. Moreover, the public is made aware of the fact that Mrs Erlynne made the same mistake twenty years previously, when she left Lady Windermere‘s father and her child due to the same misbelief. Finally, the audience discovers that Mrs Erlynne, contrary to what all her actions have revealed about her so far, bitterly repents of her attitude, since her decision has kept her away from her daughter and it has also resulted in her banishment from society. Therefore, through a few lines, Wilde is able to change the public‘s perspective of a character who has been presented as futile and motivated by money.

Since every action of each character – which is responsible for the constitution of the plot – is announced through dialogue, language is the fundamental raw material of Wilde‘s plays. Language is one of the most prolific elements for the analysis of a play, as it is rich in significance, which makes it unique.

Nevertheless, most critics agree that, in addition to Wilde‘s command of language he was also a master of other aspects of stagecraft. One such critic is Richard Allen Cave, who, in his Introduction to *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, states that

> [c]ountless productions of the plays have focused on that [linguistic] element of their artistry to the exclusion of their other dramatic excellences; and this is to do Wilde a disservice. The plays are undoubtedly witty; there is no denying that strength. But Wilde was the consummate dramatist, possessing a profound insight into the range of the arts that together constitute theatre in performance. [...] from the first, plays such as *Vera or The Nihilists* [...] and *The Duchess of Padua* [...] show him preoccupied with more than characterization and plotting: Wilde is clearly reaching out for a concept of total theatre, where colour and design, the spatial relations of actors within the playing space, music and movement, all contribute to shaping the thematic life of the drama (2000, p. 8, notes added).

In Cave‘s opinion, any critic who attributes language as the richest aspect of Wilde‘s plays impoverishes the multiple features of Wilde‘s bright ability as a playwright. Even though Wilde‘s linguistic abilities are acclaimed by critics, Richard Allen Cave adds a new perspective in the treatment of Wilde‘s work, for Wilde was indeed a talented playwright who was in control of every aspect of his plays, from writing to staging.

Cave‘s posture is clearly opposite to that held by Martin Esslin, who supports that, in addition to sustaining the plot, which is constituted by action, dialogue is sometimes action itself. Martin Esslin (1983) affirms that the function of language is the characterisation of action: _[a]nalyse any skilfully written play and you will find that invariably the characterisation is in the action. In drama, of course, language very often

is action. One could go further and claim that all language in drama of necessity *becomes* action‘ (p. 40). In all of Wilde‘s plays this statement is true, for if a character declares he/she has done something, the declared action automatically becomes true. This is what happens in *Vera, or the Nihilists*, when Alexis tells Vera that his father, the Czar, was not always a bad person. Alexis argues that he became a bad person under the influence of Prince Paul, and the audience has no reason to doubt that in the past the emperor was different. The action of Prince Paul‘s influence over him is seen as certain just because it was stated to have been so. Therefore, dialogue announces actions, which means to say that language becomes action.

However, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this process goes even further. Some of the characters‘ actions occur only in their speech, for they are the product of the characters‘ creative minds. Such is the case of Cecily‘s engagement to Algernon, which exists only in her mind, her diary and her speech. She is so creative that she makes up letters she assumes Algernon has sent to her:

> ALGERNON: My letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.
> CECILY: You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener.
> ALEGERNON: Oh, do let me read them, Cecily? (WILDE, 1994, p. 41).

In this case language does not make actions true, but still it becomes action. At first, Algernon denies he has written letters to Cecily, but when she tells him that she was forced to write them for him, he even wants to read the letters she wrote on his behalf. When Cecily‘s announcement of her engagement to Algernon is received by him as true, every action declared and performed by her becomes part of their love story.

Although Richard Allen Cave and Martin Esslin diverge with regard to Wilde‘s works, neither of them are wrong. Wilde does indeed master language, which is not to say that he leaves aside other important features in his theatrical works. Although language pervades many other theatrical elements, such as plot, action and characterisation, the most important thing is the fact that Wilde works his dramatic compositions as a whole. In Wilde‘s plays each aspect is worked minutely for it is the combination of elements which creates works of art.

Language, which is understood to be developed through dialogue, is able to carry levels of meaning, and, along with other theatrical aspects, composes the richness of Wilde‘s plays. Nonetheless, if taken separately, each element is worth of deeper

analysis. Since critics generally focus on dialogue in isolation from other constituents, it tends to be seen as the richest component of Wilde‘s plays.

Jonathan Freedman is one of these critics, for, in his introduction to *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, he proposes to analyse the dialogue of Wilde‘s plays from another angle:

> [w]hat makes Wilde both so salient and so resistant to contemporary Anglo-American theory is that, like current criticism, he focuses in theory and practice on the nature of the linguistic act, but in such a way as to underline simultaneously the two understandings of language that divide contemporary critics: the vision of language as an arbitrary system and that which sees it as a social artefact. For Wilde, words were on the one hand always already absurd, artificed, part of a contrived, conventional system; yet they are also and by that same logic always already socially sedimented and culturally contumacious (1998, p. 6).

In Wilde‘s plays it may be observed that there is an underlying text, which contains aesthetic aspects as well as social criticism. This dual approach can be found in most of Wilde‘s plays, and, despite what Freedman claims, its roots extend beyond the nature of the linguistic act. But that is a topic for another chapter.

3.2 Oscar Wilde’s Tragedies

Oscar Wilde completed three tragedies: *Vera, or The Nihilists*, *The Duchess of Padua* and *Salomé*. When these plays were written, they were not immediately staged, for a number of reasons. When they were finally performed, they received harsh criticism, except for *Salomé*, which had its share of criticism, but was also praised by William Archer and Alfred Douglas. Both *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* were regarded by critics as melodramas rather than tragedies.

Despite the critics‘ comments, in this study, Wilde‘s tragedies are going to be discussed in the light of Aestheticism. Thus, commentary on the tragedies will be developed in order to include an analysis of their major structural and linguistic aspects.

3.2.1 *Vera, or The Nihilists*

Vera, or the Nihilists is Wilde‘s first play. It was written in 1880, but only performed for the first time in 1883, in New York, at the Union Square Theatre, based on revisions made by Wilde while lecturing in America in 1882. In fact, in 1880, with

only a few copies privately printed, arrangements were made with notable actresses for a production in the United Kingdom, but this never materialised. Two years later the play would be performed in the United States, but it was not a success and its run was halted after only one week. Nowadays it is rarely revived.

Vera is a melodramatic tragedy set in Russia and it is said to be loosely based on the story of Vera Zasulich, a Russian Marxist writer and revolutionary. The plot revolves around a group of Russian terrorists, also known as The Nihilists, whose primary aim is to kill the Czar. Vera and one of her father‘s employees join the Nihilists and years later Vera is the top assassin of the terrorist group. She has a love affair with one of her fellow Nihilists, Alexis, who reveals his true identity: he is the heir to the Russian throne. The Nihilists succeed in killing the Czar, but Alexis is crowned in his place. This leads to plans for killing the new Czar, as the Nihilists do not agree to being commanded by Alexis, whom they consider a traitor. Vera is responsible for putting the plan into practice. She must enter the palace, kill Alexis and throw her bloodstained dagger out of the window so that the Nihilist agents will have a signal that she has accomplished her objective. If she does not do that, the agents will break into the palace to kill the Czar. Vera enters the palace to accomplish her mission, but she kills herself instead and throws the dagger out of the window.

Besides the fact that the plot is loosely based on the story of Vera Zasulich, there are some historical aspects involving the composition of this drama that certainly influenced the decision of theatre directors not to stage it. At the time of writing, the reform-minded Czar Alexander II was involved in a struggle with revolutionaries who sought to assassinate him and eventually succeeded. Peter Raby (1988) comments that:

> *Vera* [...] was actually in rehearsal at the Adelphi Theatre with Mrs Bernard Beere in the title role when it was withdrawn in November 1881, ostensibly because of ~~th~~e present state of political feeling in England”. Since the Czar, Alexander II, had been assassinated in March 1881, the central event of Wilde‘s play written in the previous year, there were some grounds for such a postponement. Until *An Ideal Husband* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde never again treated contemporary material so directly (p. 82).

Although it may have happened as a matter of coincidence, the content of Wilde‘s play could have disturbed diplomatic relations between England and Russia, and therefore it had to wait until that delicate moment had passed, which only occurred two years later.

Though none of Wilde‘s characters correspond to actual Russian people of the time, mainly because Wilde had not situated his play in contemporary time, the above

situation was well-known both to Wilde and to the audience for which he was writing. Despite all these facts, Wilde wrote a letter to the actress Mary Prescott, with whom he was negotiating the main role, in July 1883, in which he justifies himself, saying that he is not dealing with historical facts in his play:

> [...] it is a play not of politics but of passion. It deals with no theories of government, but with men and women simply; and modern Nihilistic Russian, with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms, is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love (WILDE, 1962, p. 148 apud DANSON, 1998, p. 155).

Even if Wilde situated *Vera* almost a century before – the time of the play is 1795 – and hence he did not consider his play to be related to real facts, the tragedy was only performed for the first time outside Britain some years later, which reveals that Wilde‘s perspective of a disconnection between art and life was not shared by everyone.

In addition to the fact that the main character shares her name with Vera Zasulich, she is also characterised as a revolutionary. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the play Vera is not presented as an activist character. In fact, she is quite an unpretentious girl who helps her father in the management of his inn. In the opening scene of the play, the audience is told by Vera‘s father, Peter Sabouroff, and his employee, Michael, about Vera‘s personality and her lack of vanity. Vera is described by them as someone who is always trying to help people, and when she enters the stage she is wearing a peasant‘s dress, which distinguishes her as a simple girl. Due to Peter Sabouroff and Michael‘s discussion, the audience creates expectations about Vera, and when she makes her entrance, the audience starts to form an opinion about her, based on her description, and also on her actions and her appearance.

As soon as the first act starts, though, there is a transformation in Vera‘s characterisation. Vera is said to be at the Grand Duke‘s ball in order to have an opportunity to see the Czar face to face. While the Nihilists wait for her return, they talk about her and the audience is given a new description: ‗She is as hard to capture as a she-wolf is, and twice as dangerous‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 687). Therefore, the audience starts to form a new perception, for they are aware that Vera has undergone an alteration. The audience‘s expectations are met when Vera arrives, for she appears in a ball dress. The change in her costume reveals a modification in her character, since Vera has left behind her simplicity and now she has become the top assassin of the Nihilists, which means she has developed in many directions and has become a sophisticated

woman. Nonetheless, it is noticeable due to her comments on the suffering of her nation that in her heart Vera is still the same girl worried about other people. In fact, Vera‘s compassion and sympathy are characteristics that compose her strength and her driving force as a Nihilist.

Vera has some internal conflicts, as she is in love with Alexis even having vowed never to love. She has become the top assassin of the Nihilists, but still she retains a weakness: she is undecided between her feelings for Alexis and her wish to start a revolution in her country. Therefore, she spends most of the play taking contradictory decisions, in some of which she is influenced by her fellow Nihilists.

At the beginning of the play, when Michael tells he has followed Alexis and has seen him entering the Czar‘s palace, all the Nihilists start to accuse Alexis of being a spy and they want to kill him without even listening to his arguments. Even after Alexis confirms he has spent the night in the Czar‘s palace, Vera still believes he is innocent and she stands between Alexis and Michael in an attempt to protect her love with her own life. When Alexis reveals his true identity in order to protect the Nihilists from the Czar‘s guards, he earns the respect of Vera.

Nonetheless, when the Czar is killed and Alexis is crowned the new Czar, Alexis does not appear at the Nihilists‘ meeting, and his attitude is interpreted as betrayal. Vera does not want to accept that Alexis is a traitor, but the Nihilists remind her of her oath and Michael also lectures her about the reason why she joined the Nihilists: to revenge her brother‘s imprisonment. Consequently, she is convinced that she should kill Alexis if she takes the bloody lot, which is used to choose at random who among the Nihilists will kill the new Czar. Indeed, Vera takes the bloody lot and she is then instructed by the Nihilists on how she must act: she has to infiltrate the palace, stab the Czar and throw the dagger out of the window as a signal to the Nihilist agents below. If she does not, the agents will break in and kill him. Vera is reminded of her brother‘s imprisonment and it makes her decide to kill the Czar:

> VERA (*standing motionless in the middle*): [...] I am no woman now. My blood seems turned to gall; my heart is as cold as steel is; my hand shall be more deadly. From the desert and the tomb the voice of my prisoned brother cries aloud, and bids me strike one blow for liberty (WILDE, 2003, p. 712-13).

About this extract, Dariusz Pestka, in *Oscar Wilde: Between Aestheticism and Anticipation of Modernism* (1999), states that this change in Vera‘s feelings sounds like sensationalism rather than real emotion:

> [e]ven the cursory look at the extract will suffice to see the unmotivated transition in Vera‘s behaviour in spite of her legitimate conviction that the young Tsar has strong liberal sympathies. In addition, the diction of the passage sounds high-flown and artificial, unsuitable for the naturalistic setting of a large garret lit by oil lamps. As a result, the sudden twist of plot, which was to be developed so skilfully by Wilde in his mature works, here serves as a mere vehicle of sensationalism, requiring, unfortunately, the mechanical reactions of the characters. [...] [Also] The pathetic asides in Wilde‘s drama [...] ring false, giving the impression of being borrowed from a less contemporary work. Therefore, the principal‘s passions appear to be forced and to mimic somebody else‘s feelings (1999, p.71).

In fact, the lack of veracity in Wilde‘s plays was a recurrent criticism over the years. Wilde was accused of manipulating the facts of the plot in his favour, regardless of the effects this would create in his works. However, it is important to bear in mind that Wilde was not interested in producing a work that resembled reality: indeed, this was an aspect he was completely against. Therefore, it seems incongruent to expect him to do so. Therefore, unnatural as Vera‘s speech and actions may seem, her characterisation might be regarded as intentional.

Because of her twist of actions and feelings, Vera is not considered consistent in her decisions, which makes her seem not only contradictory, but also unreliable. Dariusz Pestka (1999) points out that Vera‘s suicide could be regarded as an act of bravery,

> [b]ut the facts testify to something absolutely contrary: her fellow conspirators themselves proved to be spiritually disloyal to the cause of liberty and justice by letting Prince Paul join them. In the light of this, Vera‘s pathetic renunciation of her love as well as her life appears unconvincing and, moreover, unnecessary, which diminishes the psychological probability of her act and makes her personality less real and thus less likely to identify with. The tragical denouement intended by Wilde is tinged with the illogical and the irrational, and, losing its force the would-be tragedy degenerates into a mere melodrama (1999, p. 72).

However, what may have gone unnoticed by Dariusz Pestka is the fact that, even if the Nihilists have accepted Prince Paul as one of them, when Vera questions the president of the revolutionary group about the danger of letting Prince Paul participate in their meetings, the president answers that they can use Prince Paul and afterwards strangle him. Therefore, the Nihilists are neither naïve nor disloyal as Pestka argues.

Although Vera‘s varied decisions may be seen as unsteady, she has an honourable character, which combines with her upright speech. When Vera starts

talking about the suffering of the Russian people, her indignation is translated into an exalted speech:

> VERA: Martial law! O God, how easy it is for a king to kill his people by thousands, but we cannot rid ourselves of one crowned man in Europe! What is there of awful majesty in these men which makes the hand unsteady, the dagger treacherous, the pistol-shot harmless? Are they not men of like passions with ourselves, vulnerable to the same diseases, of flesh and blood not different from our own? [...] Methinks that if I stood face to face with one of the crowned men my eye would see more clearly, my aim be more sure, my whole body gain a strength and power that was not my own! (WILDE, 2003, p. 689-690).

While Vera questions whether the power hold by monarchy is so strong that all attempts to kill sovereigns seem to fail, she lists and qualifies these attempts, showing how varied and ineffective they have been thitherto. Vera also questions whether it is possible that tyrants are so different from other human beings that killing them can be considered an unachievable task. She goes on to enumerate the reactions she would have if she were to face such a sovereign. All these enumerations come in an uninterrupted flux of thought, as if to show how vivid Vera‘s language becomes when she is infuriated.

Vera is once more exalted in her reactions at the end of the play, for she decides to kill herself instead of Alexis. In fact, she seems determined to keep her promise to avenge her brother‘s imprisonment, but as soon as she meets Alexis, her feelings surpass her reason and she leaves revenge aside:

> VERA (*clutching dagger*): To strangle whatever nature is in me, neither to love nor to be loved, neither to pity nor – Oh, I am a woman! God help me, I am a woman! O Alexis! I too have broken my oath; I am a traitor. I love. Oh, do not speak, do not speak – (*kisses his lips*) – the first, the last time. (*He clasps her in his arms; they sit on the couch together*) (WILDE, 2003, p.
> 719).

Vera shows she is susceptible to love, and she can no longer fight it. Thus, she abdicates her own life so that her beloved Alexis may live. Actually, when Vera allows Alexis to live, she is not only acting according to her heart, but also to her beliefs. In Alexis‘ and Vera‘s final lines in the play, when Alexis asks her, ‗What have you done?‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 720), she gives a decisive answer: ‗I have saved Russia‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 720). Vera‘s statement reveals that she strongly believes that Alexis will be a fair emperor for Russia.

It is worth remembering that in the previous act, just before the Nihilists decide to kill Alexis, Michael is indeed talking about the new Czar‘s decisions. Prince Paul has

brought from the Palace the proclamation the new Czar intends to make the following day, and both the Nihilists‘ president and Michael claim that they must kill Alexis that night, for if they allow the new Czar to make his proclamation, both Michael and the president say it will be too late for the action of the Nihilists. The content of the new Czar‘s public statement is not revealed to the audience, but it is described by Michael as ‗a loaf of bread flung to a starving nation‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 710). According to this description, it can be assumed that Alexis‘ announcement will be well received by the Russian people, which will probably result in popular support for the new Czar. The Nihilists fear that if the Czar becomes popular, they will lose their strength; hence, they need to hurry in order to kill Alexis that night.

As Vera commits suicide instead of killing Alexis, she gives the new Czar precisely the period of time he needs to proclaim the new state of Russia, which is seen by her as the first step towards a fairer life for the Russian people. Therefore, in killing herself, Vera is in fact strangling the nature of her love for Alexis in favour of Russia. She is not breaking her oath, as might appear to be the case to an inattentive audience member; instead, she is keeping it to the end as she takes it to a performative level. Vera really strangles whatever nature is in her, which denotes that her suicide has become an act of abnegation rather than an act of love.

Alexis Ivanacievitch, Vera‘s loved one, reciprocates the protagonist‘s feelings. Although Alexis and Vera seem to have a secret relationship, at the beginning of the play they have not openly declared their love for each other. In fact, Alexis holds a secret of which even Vera is unnaware: he is the Czarevitch, heir to the Russian throne.

Despite the fact that he is the Czar‘s first-born son, Alexis sympathises with poor Russian people and he seeks a way to change his country‘s reality, which leads him to join the Nihilists. When Alexis‘ father dies, Prince Paul hurriedly insists on crowning him the new Czar, for he is the only heir in line to the throne. As the recently crowned Czar, Alexis seizes an opportunity to revolutionise Russia, and his first attitude is to banish Prince Paul to Paris. Then, Alexis discharges all Russian ministers from their posts. In spite of his good intentions, Alexis is tremendously naïve. Having banished all his father‘s ministers, the new Czar believes he has no enemies left. Because of that, he spares the guards and his page and is left alone in the palace, unaware that he is providing the opportunity the Nihilists seek to kill him.

Like Vera, Alexis has some conflicts. He is divided between following his Nihilist oath and being a fair king to Russia. Nonetheless, he follows his heart and becomes the Czar, since he believes that he will be able to end injustice in his country:

> ALEXIS: [...] How strange it is, the most real parts of one‘s life always seem to be a dream! The council, the fearful law which was to kill the people, the arrest, the cry in the courtyard, the pistol-shot, my father‘s bloody hands, and then the crown! One can live for years sometimes, without living at all, and then all life comes crowding into a single hour. I had no time to think. Before my father‘s hideous shriek of death had died in my ears I found this crown on my head, the purple robe around me, and heard myself called a king. I would have given it up all then; it seemed nothing to me then; but now, can I give it up now? (WILDE, 2003, p. 717).

Alexis was sure he could give the crown up before his father died, but having the chance to lead Russia to a righteous future he feels he cannot quit his new responsibilities. Alexis‘ speech denotes his youth and inexperience, for he is astonished by the fast sequence of turnarounds that has taken place in his life in the past few days. As Alexis alleges he had no time to think about the decision of being crowned, it is possible to conclude that he was led to accept his hereditary right to be a Czar. Alexis thus seems to be easily manipulated, which makes him unsuitable for the position of a leader.

Nonetheless, Alexis has a pure and kind heart, and his love for the people prevails. In fact, his integrity is one of the characteristics that make Vera fall in love with him. Actually, as the top assassin of the Nihilists, Vera is far more experienced than Alexis, who has never left the palace, except for attending the Nihilists‘ secret meetings. Because of that, Vera treats Alexis with such great care that at the beginning of the play it seems as if she has motherly feelings for him: ‗Alexis, you here! Foolish boy, have I not prayed you to stay away? All of us here are doomed to die before our time, fated to expiate by suffering whatever good we do; but you, with your bright boyish face, you are too young to die yet‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 690). Nonetheless, in the final act, she meets him in the palace, and her discourse changes, for she does not address Alexis in such a chaste way.

The attention Vera pays to Alexis provokes jealousy in Michael, who also has feelings for her. In fact, Michael had loved Vera long before they become Nihilists, that is, since the time when he worked as an employee in her father‘s inn. Vera does not entertain feelings for Michael, though. She has never seen any prospect of having a romantic relationship with him, which makes Michael resentful of Alexis, who has

easily won her heart. Michael therefore decides to prove that Alexis is neither worthy of trust nor love. When he discovers that Alexis has slept in the palace, he wants to kill him immediately, but he is thwarted by Vera. Nonetheless, whenever he has the opportunity, he does whatever he can to convince her that Alexis is a traitor and thus deserves to die. Given his feelings for Vera, Michael‘s attitude towards Alexis can be regarded as biased rather than righteous.

Even so, Michael is one of the most radical Nihilists, and he evidently thinks that an armed revolution must take place. Although every Nihilist is opposed to the Czar, Michael is the one who schemes with the President of the Nihilists to kill him, and prevents the President from telling other members about his plans – as he believes there is a traitor among them. As he is highly strung and impatient, he wants to end injustice with his own sword.

Michael‘s energetic behaviour leads him to make hasty decisions, as when he discovers Prince Paul is a new fellow Nihilist: _We will keep Prince Paul here, and find some office for him in our reign of terror. He is well accustomed by this time to bloody work‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 709). Michael does not even give a second thought to the fact that Prince Paul was not sympathetic to the Nihilist cause some time before.

Actually, Prince Paul Maraloffski starts the play as the Prime Minister of Russia, but, in the course of the story, he loses his position and, afraid of being left with no authority, he joins the Nihilists. Prince Paul has no problem in switching his opinions as long as he is favoured; hence, he makes the most of the Nihilists‘ decision to accept him. Just as quickly as Prince Paul insists on crowning Alexis the new Czar, so the former Prime Minister is also ready to support Michael‘s decision to kill the very Czar he had helped to crown. From the beginning, Prince Paul never hides the true nature of his character. He is a cunning, manipulative tyrant, interested in exercising control, regardless of the means he has to use to achieve his aims.

It is evident that Prince Paul holds more power than the Czar, as he is described by the Czarevitch as the man who brought the Emperor to the current condition of the most hated man in Russia. Actually, the Czar seems to be his subject instead of his sovereign, for he insists on pleasing Prince Paul in order to keep on good terms with him: _CZAR [...] (*To* PRINCE PAUL.): You are not angry with me, Prince? You won‘t desert me, will you? Say you won‘t desert me. What do you want? You can have anything – anything‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 699). Noticeably, Prince Paul is the mastermind

behind the horrible state of things suffered by the Russian people, and he does not wish to lose control over it, so he joins the Nihilists to take revenge for his banishment.

Being so sly, Prince Paul is clearly ironic, which makes him the most similar character to the Wildean dandy, since most of his statements are epigrammatic witticisms:

> VERA: The tiger cannot change its nature, nor the snake lose its venom; but are you turned a lover of the people?
> PRINCE PAUL: Mon Dieu, non, Mademoiselle! I would much sooner talk scandal in a drawing-room than treason in a cellar. Besides, I hate the common mob, who smell of garlic, smoke bad tobacco, get up early, and dine off one dish (WILDE, 2003, p. 707).

Even when he joins the Nihilists, Prince Paul does not miss a beat, and behaves as snobbishly as possible. Prince Paul does not pretend to be concerned about the Nihilists' cause for a single moment. The only shared interest between him and the Nihilists is the desire to become a prevailing force. Even so, Prince Paul does not hesitate in taking the oath in order to be accepted by the revolutionaries. His sarcastic speech matches perfectly with his deceptive personality and he is one of the characters who bring a touch of humour to this tragic play.

Along with Prince Paul, the Czar and his ministers compose the comical core of the play, for the reason that they do not seem to take their responsibilities seriously. The Czar has a paranoid suspicion that everyone surrounding him wants to take his life: he does not even allow his son to get close to him. His attitudes are those of a caricature monarch who is simultaneously a tyrant and a frightened man, which makes him rather a ridiculous figure.

The Nihilists, in their turn, are the opposite of the monarchy members. They are serious and solemn in their political cause. Because of that, their language is full of righteous heroism and they never sound trivial as they do not deliver amusing statements. They are a contrast both in form and content to the aristocratic characters, for, although the Nihilist characters are noble, they lack the mischievous attractiveness of their opponents and, as far as the audience is concerned, they seem quite pale when confronted with the bright wickedness of the courtiers.

According to the characteristics of the Nihilists and the members of the court, in *Vera, or The Nihilists* the characters can be roughly divided into two categories: the serious and the trivial. The Nihilists with their solemnity and their revolutionary issues represent the serious, for they have a politically engaged speech that favours the

disadvantaged. The aristocracy represent the trivial, for they mock the preoccupations of the people, since they lack the limitations that have led the Nihilists to fight for a better life.

The satire of the aristocracy also presents a trait of cruelty, which can be regarded as Wilde‘s attempt to denounce the double standards of the upper classes. Prince Paul is one of the characters who satirises the Russian people the most:

> PRINCE PAUL: The people and their rights bore me. I am sick of both. In these modern days to be vulgar, illiterate, common and vicious, seems to give a man a marvellous infinity of rights that his honest fathers never dreamed of. Believe me, Prince, in good democracy every man should be an aristocrat; but these people in Russia who seek to thrust us out are no better than the animals in one‘s preserves, and made to be shot at, most of them (WILDE, 2003, p. 698-99).

Prince Paul‘s irony creates a spark of humour in the oppressive topic of socioeconomic differences and class struggle. Nonetheless, the satirical comments are made in such a trivial way, that they seem to be mere entertainment, and Wilde‘s serious subtext is often overlooked.

The game between the trivial and the serious, which would be better developed in Wilde‘s subsequent plays, does not occur only in terms of theatrical structure, but also in reference to Wilde‘s layered text. On the surface, the text presents ironic comments that seem to be intended to amuse the audience, but at a deeper level, there are outlines of social criticism.

Critical Reviews

Most critics, not only at the time when *Vera, or The Nihilists* was written but also currently, regard the play as a melodrama rather than a tragedy. Peter Raby (1988) describes the play as ‗a somewhat superficial and excessively melodramatic treatment of Nihilism set in [...] Russia‘ (1988, p. 82). Essentially, the Nihilists‘ exalted speeches, Vera‘s tendency to overreact to her divided feelings and twisted decisions, as well as Michael‘s unbalanced attitudes, account for the categorisation of *Vera* as a melodramatic play.

Besides the enriching subtext that seems to have been ignored by the critics, there is a consideration to be made regarding a tool Wilde mastered, the foreshadowed plot. From a scene at the beginning of the play it is possible to foresee its end, so that

the spectator never loses sight of the structuring of the plot. On this subject, Pestka claims that Wilde

> attempts here to synthetize the plot, dialogue, the setting, costumes, and musical elements into an inextricable whole. Thus, in the first garret scene, all the revolutionaries wear masks which not only literally hide their faces, but also impose upon them a corporate identity that symbolically may denote no identity at all. [...] The most impressive passages of the play contain the statements of Prince Paul Maraloffski. He is the prime minister and the powerful adviser to the old Tsar. Largely responsible for the reign of terror, he is sent into exile by the new Tsar, and now, in revenge, he joins the nihilists. Ironically, his cynical flexibility seems to be matched by that of the revolutionists. This unscrupulous shift of allegiance is a logical continuation of the mask scene in which the nihilists' identities might have seemed misleading (1999, p. 71-2).

Pestka sees continuity between the beginning and the end of the play; however, the mask scene can be also interpreted as a first sign of what is yet to come. The most important thing, though, is the fact that Wilde is aware of the effect he wants to cause. He demonstrates that he has total control over all the elements of the play, for he arranges it as a unity, where plot, characters and dialogues are structured together. Nonetheless, this unification may backfire on the author: the parts are so closely tied to each other that if any of them fail, the others tend to collapse too.

Wilde's first play presents all the tools and devices Wilde would widen in his succeeding dramatic works. The game between the trivial and the serious, the epigrammatic speeches which are able both to entertain the audience and to hold an underlying text, the twists of plot: all the elements Wilde mastered as a playwright were already present in his first experiment in the dramatic field. Wilde was to bring his abilities to write plays to full development in the subsequent years, as if to redeem for his failures in his first drama, but he had started to pave the path that would lead him to success.

3.2.2 *The Duchess of Padua*

The Duchess of Padua is Oscar Wilde's second play: it is a five-act melodramatic tragedy set in Padua and written in blank verse. It was written for the American actress Mary Anderson in early 1883. After she turned it down, it was abandoned until its first performance under the title *Guido Ferranti* on 26 January 1891 at the Broadway Theatre in New York, where it ran for three weeks.

Regarding his originally settling on Mary Anderson for the title role, Wilde mentioned in a letter to the actress:

> I cannot write the scenario until I see you and talk to you. All good plays are a combination of the dream of a poet and that practical knowledge of the actor which gives concentration to the action... I want you to rank with the great actresses of the earth... having in you a faith which is as flawless as it is fervent I doubt not for a moment that I can and will write for you a play which, created for you and inspired by you, shall give you the glory of a Rachel, and may yield me the fame of a Hugo (qtd in ELLMAN, 1987, p. 198).

Nevertheless, Wilde had difficulty negotiating with Mary Anderson‘s business manager and stepfather, Hamilton Griffin. When Wilde was on his lecture tour in the United States, he met Mary Anderson and Hamilton Griffin in Boston on 23 September 1882. After discussing their plans, they agreed to open the play on 22 January 1883. In October 1882, Wilde was informed that they had decided to wait until September 1883. Finally, a contract was signed in December, and Wilde should have finished the play by 1 March 1883, at the latest. However, Wilde is said to have finished the play only fourteen days after Griffin‘s deadline. After that, Anderson proved hard to communicate with, and finally refused the role in April. [7]

The play was unexpectedly rediscovered in 1889 by American actor Lawrence Barrett, who wrote to Wilde about producing it. Wilde agreed to meet him in July to discuss the play, answering that he was ‗very glad to make any alterations in it you can suggest‘ (qtd in ELLMAN, 1987, p. 313). Barrett suggested a new title for the play, which should be named after the male protagonist rather than the heroine, and under which he claimed the play would have greater success. The play then premiered under the title *Guido Ferranti*, and it lacked Wilde‘s name on it, for Barrett alleged it would not attract the public after the failure of *Vera; or, The Nihilists*. However, this did not deceive the *New York Tribune* as they correctly identified the author in their review, after which it was advertised as ‗Oscar Wilde‘s Love Tragedy‘ (ELLMAN, 1987, p. 314). The play was first produced in January 1891, in New York, and ran for only three weeks until Barrett brought it to a halt. Wilde sought to produce a second run of the play in London, but was refused by both the actor-managers, Henry Irving and George Alexander.

[7] Specific details about Wilde‘s transactions with Mary Anderson and Hamilton Griffin can be found in *Oscar Wilde*, by Richard Ellman (1987), on pages 186 to 189 and 200 to 202.

The Duchess of Padua tells the story of a young man named Guido who was left as a baby in the charge of a man he calls his uncle. Guido receives a letter in which he is instructed to meet a man in Padua with regards to something concerning his parentage. When he arrives in Padua he is convinced by a man named Moranzone to abandon his only friend, Ascanio, in order to dedicate himself to revenging his father‘s death at the hands of Simone Gesso, the Duke of Padua. After infiltrating into the palace, Guido has become the Duke‘s henchman. Nonetheless, in the course of the play Guido finds he has fallen in love with Beatrice, the Duke of Padua‘s wife. He confides his love to her, and he is reciprocated. By this time Guido has changed his plans and decides not to kill the Duke of Padua. Guido intends to leave his father‘s dagger at the Duke‘s bedside to let the Duke know that his life could have been taken if Guido had wanted to kill him. On the way to the bedchamber, however, Guido is met by Beatrice, who has herself killed the Duke so that she might be with Guido. Guido is horrified at the sin committed on his behalf and rejects Beatrice, claiming that their love has been soiled. She runs from him and when she comes across some guards she claims that Guido killed the Duke. He is brought to trial the next day. Beatrice tries to prevent Guido from speaking on his behalf for fear that she might be exposed as the killer, but Guido confesses the crime in order to protect her, and the date for his execution is set. Beatrice goes to visit Guido in his cell and finds him asleep. Before waking him up, she drinks some poison. Then, Beatrice wakes him to tell she has repented of accusing him and she has confessed to the murder. Nonetheless, the magistrates had not believed her and would not allow her to pardon Guido. Guido promptly pardons her. However, when Guido discovers that Beatrice has drunk all the poison, he shares a kiss with her before she dies, at which time Guido takes her knife and kills himself.

Beatrice, the eponymous duchess of the play, is firstly characterised as a kind-hearted and merciful woman, who stands between her husband and the people in order to defend them from the cruelties that are imposed by the Duke of Padua. She constantly pleads to the Duke for mercy towards the people and even shares her money with them so that they can buy something to eat.

Suddenly, Beatrice becomes a character capable of killing her own husband, removing the only barrier between her and her love, Guido Ferranti. Considering the abrupt change Beatrice goes through, it is not exactly a surprise that Guido rejects her being horrified by her acts. Guido‘s rejection provokes even greater rage in the Duchess and she shows herself to be meaner as she accuses him of having killed the Duke. In the

trial, she is still infuriated and tries to prevent him from telling the truth. Beatrice wants so much to make Guido suffer for having rejected her, that she makes her speech before the court as if she had always loved her husband, as if she would really want to avenge his death. Feeling betrayed by the one for whom she committed a crime, her love becomes hatred, and now she wants to unleash her wrath. The kindness she felt for the poor is easily replaced by hate and vengeance towards Guido. In all these attitudes Beatrice discloses a dark side of her personality: she becomes a cruel woman, capable of doing harm to anyone who crosses her path.

However, as Guido does not accuse her and seems willing to die for her – he even confesses to a crime he did not commit –, she faints in shock and awe. When she finds out that Guido does not intend to denounce her to the Minister of Justice, she is grateful and repentant. The Duchess‘s feelings change once again. She is willing to die to pay for her crime and she wants Guido to go unpunished since he has not committed any crime. In the end, the Duchess recognises that she has taken a wrong path, which led her and Guido to their gloomy ending. She repents of both having accused Guido for the Duke‘s death and killing her husband. Taking the blame for her acts is what makes her virtuous again, and enables her to die with dignity and in peace.

All the changes Beatrice suffers in her characterisation make her an unsteady character, capable of having feelings that go from one extreme to the other. Unlike Vera, who suffers a change in her characterisation motivated by her brother‘s wish that she revenges the Nihilists‘ cause and his imprisonment, Beatrice has no strong motivation for these changes. Her reactions are so exaggerated that they can be regarded as melodramatic and unlikely to be true.

Guido‘s trajectory in the play is the opposite of Beatrice‘s. Although he is shocked by Beatrice‘s capacity to murder her own husband, he is able to forgive her and his love for her does not change. In fact, Guido‘s transformation is the reverse of Beatrice‘s. Whereas she is firstly depicted as generous and warm-hearted and then becomes cruel and vindictive, Guido, on the other hand, is first characterised as a young man whose heart is easily filled with ideas of revenge, and later becomes a passionate and peaceful man. Therefore, Guido shows that love has transformed him, and, after this change, he presents a noble character and a pure and dignified heart, which can no longer be influenced by Count Moranzone‘s plans of vengeance.

Count Moranzone, in his turn, is a key character in *The Duchess of Padua*, for the plot revolves around him. It is because of his letter that Guido Ferranti comes from

Perugia to Padua to discover more about his father and the circumstances of his birth. It is also Count Moranzone who suggests that Guido should revenge his father‘s death and depart into the Duke‘s house in order to gain his confidence so that he can betray him afterwards. It is thus because of Count Moranzone that Guido comes to know Beatrice, the Duchess of Padua, and without his interference in Guido‘s life, there would be no plot. Nevertheless, love trumps revenge, and Guido neither keeps his oath, nor does he fulfil his supposed destiny, which leads the plot to a totally different outcome from that which Moranzone had in mind.

Count Moranzone‘s key role in the plot may be foreseen even before he outlines his plans to Guido, for Ascanio, Guido‘s friend, can foretell that Guido‘s talk with Count Moranzone will not have a positive result: _ASCANIO: Speak not to him, / There is a dreadful terror in his look‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 608). Actually, Wilde gives small signs of the end of the story throughout the first act. It happens when Moranzone is telling Guido about his plans, and Moranzone notices that Guido is dominated by emotions, which can ruin the vengeance:

> MORANZONE: Nay, nay, I trust thee not; your
> hot young blood,
> Undisciplined nature, and too violent rage
> Will never tarry for this great revenge,
> But wreck itself on passion (WILDE, 2003, p. 610).

Moranzone‘s prediction is uttered in his first meeting with Guido, and his first impressions of Guido are proved right. Guido really gives up the revenge plan, and he is later destroyed by his passion for the Duchess, showing that Moranzone‘s words were prophetic.

There are also two other signs of the characters‘ destiny. The first one is given by the Duke, when he warns his fellows to watch carefully for their wives, so that they do not cheat them with Guido:

> DUKE: [...] Look to your wives, my lords,
> When such a gallant comes to Padua.
> Thou dost well to laugh, Count Bardi; I have noted
> How merry is that husband by whose hearth
> Sits an uncomely wife (WILDE, 2003, p. 615).

The most ironic fact is that the Duke‘s warning backfires, for his own wife betrays him with Guido. As the Duke is a powerful man, proud, and capable of acting in a merciless manner, he is always teasing his fellows in order to show the alleged superiority of his intelligence. The fact that he is betrayed by his henchman and his unblemished wife

inside his own household denotes Wilde‘s tongue in cheek comments on high society manners and mores, which would be further sharpened in his subsequent plays.

The last sign given by Wilde in relation to the end of Guido and Beatrice‘s story occurs in the final scene of the first act. As Guido is swearing to avenge his father‘s death, the Duchess leaves the church, and they see each other:

> GUIDO**:** That from this hour, till my dear father‘s murder
> In blood I have revenged, I do forswear [...]
> All love of women, and the barren thing
> Which men call beauty—
> [*The organ peals in the Cathedral, and under a canopy of cloth of silver tissue, borne by four pages in scarlet, the DUCHESS OF PADUA comes down the steps; as she passes across their eyes meet for a moment, and as she leaves the stage she looks back at GUIDO, and the dagger falls from his hand*.]
> Oh! who is that?
> A CITIZEN: The Duchess of Padua! (WILDE, 2003, p. 618).

From the very first time they meet, Beatrice‘s and Guido‘s attitudes express, if not love at first sight, at least interest for each other. Beatrice reveals that she is not indifferent to Guido when she looks back at him. Beatrice‘s gaze is so intense that Guido interrupts his oath and even forgets to hold his father‘s dagger firmly. As the dagger falls from Guido‘s hands, the audience already understands that he is going to give up his revenge in favour of his feelings towards the Duchess of Padua. The fall of the dagger works as a sign on different levels. It points to Guido‘s wrack and ruin, for a fall can symbolise his life‘s destruction. It may also point to a moral lapse since the relationship between Guido and Beatrice, a married woman, is not considered correct from the perspective held by society. Finally, as Guido and Beatrice are in front of the Santa Croce cathedral, the fall of Guido‘s dagger may be regarded as a reference to the Biblical belief of the loss of humanity‘s original innocence and happiness resulting from Adam and Eve‘s eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Beatrice and Guido do eat the forbidden fruit and their disobedience results in the loss of innocence and happiness. Their forbidden feelings towards each other lead Guido to give up his original plans, and Beatrice to kill her own husband. Hence, Beatrice can no longer be considered a spotless woman, for she is sinful.

All these meanings can only be engendered in the performance of the play if Wilde‘s stage directions are followed. Although stage directions are not abundant in Wilde‘s plays, when they do appear – as in the scene mentioned above – they are of fundamental importance.

In *The Duchess of Padua* there are also stage directions at the beginning of each act, and they appear as a long description of the setting in which that act is supposed to happen. Stage directions in Wilde‘s second tragedy stand out for the reason that they are presented as detailed portrayals of the settings of Padua as imagined by Wilde. Except for the setting of the final act, which is in Padua‘s prison and depicted as a simple place, the settings of all the other acts are described as sumptuous. The scenarios are displayed with such richness of detail that they reveal the Duke‘s lavishness. Since in the first act the spectator discovers that the Duke‘s wealth is derived from the infamous betrayal of Guido‘s father, it becomes easier to understand Guido‘s wish for revenge, since he will be in the court of a man who sold his father‘s life for a very large amount of money. Therefore, the rich scenarios may be seen as a reminder of the perfidy suffered by Guido‘s father. It is worth remembering that Wilde is said by many critics to have composed his works as an undivided whole, in which the parts are all bound together. In *The Duchess of Padua*, this connection may be seen between the stage directions and the plot motifs.

The Duke‘s wealth portrayed in the scenarios may also be a reference to the social differences present in the play. Simone Gesso has an oppressive character which is marked by the constant exercise of power unjustly and arbitrarily, and his power comes from his socioeconomic position in Padua‘s society. His wealth is thus also a sign of his authority.

Contrary to the lovers Beatrice and Guido, Simone Gesso, the Duke of Padua is a steadfast character, as he starts and finishes the play with no significant alteration in his conduct. He is cruel, not only towards the citizens of Padua but also to the gentlemen in his household and to the Duchess. Furthermore, many of his statements carry a really deep mocking tone, which make them extremely critical. To some extent he has similarities with the dandy: both of them have a witty and ironic discourse, which places them in a higher position in relation to other characters.

The Duke is conscious that his behaviour is not well received by the people, as he is cruel and wicked. However, he is proud of being considered unpopular for he delights in being rough. Whereas the dandy, as characterised by Wilde in posterior works, feels that being misunderstood gives him an advantageous position, the Duke feels that he is given a post of advantage through his unpopularity:

> DUKE […]: Why, every man among them has his price,
> Although, to do them justice, some of them

> Are quite expensive.
> [...] The most eccentric thing a man can do
> Is to have brains, then the mob mocks at him;
> And for the mob, despise it as I do,
> I hold its bubble praise and windy favours
> In such account, that popularity
> Is the one insult I have never suffered (WILDE, 2003, p. 613-14).

The Duke shows that he is completely aware of the fact that he is surrounded by dishonest, arrogant and stupid people, and he is himself deceitful and conceited, and consequently, unpopular, although he cannot be regarded as stupid. In fact, his cleverness is always evidenced in his speech, for he uses logic to support his satirical thoughts.

However, sometimes logic is replaced by contradiction. Such is the case at the beginning of second act, in which the Duchess mediates the people‘s appeals to the Duke. At first, when people are complaining about the quality of the water with which they are provided, the Duke tells them to drink wine. When people claim they cannot afford wine, for the taxes are extremely high, the Duke tells them to be thankful that the taxes keep them sober. The Duke does not mind being considered contradictory so long as he achieves his aim, which is free himself of the people and their complaints. Therefore, he uses all the methods he can to dodge his responsibilities towards the people, and contradiction is just another means.

In fact, the Duke keeps trying to dodge his responsibilities throughout the second act. He even claims that he did not create the world with poor and rich people, and God is the one who should be blamed for socioeconomic differences: ‗Which has apportioned that some men should starve, / And others surfeit? I did not make the world‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 621). As the Duke announces these words, he sounds exactly like Peter Sabouroff, in *Vera, or The Nihilists*. In *Vera*, the protagonist‘s father, Peter, claims that other people‘s problems are not his concern, for he argues that he ‗didn‘t make the world. Let God and the Czar look to it‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 682). The line said by two characters in two different plays alludes to Wilde‘s system of references. The fact that Wilde used to refer to his own texts is quite remarkable. He created his own intertextual structure and the first instance of intertextuality in Wilde‘s dramatic texts occurs between his very first and second plays.

Although the characters in both plays use the same argument to justify their selfish attitude, the most significant point comes from the fact that Peter dodges his social responsibility by saying that God, who made the world, and the Czar, who rules

it, should be blamed for its problems. God represents the insuperable divine supremacy, whereas the Czar represents human capacity to govern and control. In *The Duchess of Padua*, the Duke is already placed in a position of authority; therefore, he will not blame the government for the problems of the people. He dodges his obligation by charging the divine power, an entity that is seen as unquestionable. Therefore, whereas Peter Sabouroff is presented as a selfish character, Simone Gesso is not only self-centered, but also a corrupt governor, for a Duke is the nobleman who rules a duchy, and as a Duke, Simone Gesso evades the responsibility of being a fair administrator.

Wilde‘s system of references thus works also as a tool of social criticism, both in *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*. Peter Sabouroff and Simone Gesso are revealed as characters who understand the problems surrounding them, but do not act in order to solve these difficulties. This kind of character is not bothered about living in a world full of differences and social injustice. In the case of the Duke of Padua, he even contributes to social inequality. Moreover, he mocks the disfavoured, which is a trait of cruelty similar to that of Prince Paul in *Vera*. In fact, Wilde would give further development to this kind of character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with Lady Bracknell, for she is aware of socioeconomic differences and thankful for being a member of the upper classes.

It may be seen that Wilde worked with similar elements in both plays, but in different ways. As Wilde said once, ‗[d]etails are of no importance in life, but in art details are vital‘ (WILDE, 1985 apud RABY, 1988, p. 83). Every time Wilde added some features and gave these aspects varied colours, they acquired a new significance inside the context of each play.

Critical reviews

Oscar Wilde was very optimistic in relation to his own writings. In fact, he described *The Duchess of Padua* to actress Mary Anderson, by stating that ‗I have no hesitation in saying that it is the masterpiece of all my literary work, the *chef d'oeuvre* of my youth‘ (qtd in ELLMAN, 1987, p. 210). Anderson, however, was less enthusiastic. She replied that

> [t]he play in its present form, I fear, would no more please the public of today than would ‗Venus Preserved‘ or ‗Lucretia Borgia‘. Neither of us can afford failure now, and your Duchess in my hands would not

> succeed, as the part does not fit me. My admiration of your ability is as great as ever (qtd in ELLMAN, 1987, p. 212).

Mary Anderson‘s first impressions of the play were proved right, for neither the critics nor the public were pleased by it.

An unsigned review in the *New York Times* after the premiere of the play – under the title *Guido Ferranti* – commented on Wilde‘s efforts to produce an artistic work:

> [t]he author, whoever he is, does not live wholly in the past. There are a number of well-imagined and skilfully wrought scenes in his play, and many passages that must have been written in a glow of excitement. If this poet was not inspired, he at least tried very hard to be, and certainly thought he was (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p.88).

Although the critic sees some positive aspects in some scenes of the play, he warns his readers that the play will not be widely accepted by critics, due to its lack of probability. The critic adds that ‗[p]robability and improbability in art, like realism and idealism, are largely matters of personal illusion‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 88). Even though the author of this review had ideas similar to Wilde‘s, his prediction was proved right, for the play‘s lack of probability overshadowed its poetic aspects.

Another unsigned review, which appeared in *The New York Daily Tribune* on 27 January 1891, points to artificiality as a downside of the play:

> [t]he new play is deftly constructed in five short acts, and is written in a strain of blank verse that is always melodious, often eloquent, and sometimes freighted with fanciful figures of rare beauty. It is less a tragedy, however, than a melodrama... the radical defect of the work is insincerity. No one in it is natural (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 89).

Insincerity and improbability were the most commented features in the critical reviews, and although more than one hundred years have passed since Wilde wrote *The Duchess of Padua*, critics have not reversed the early assessment of the play as a Victorian melodrama. Moreover, witht the huge success of Wilde‘s subsequent plays, critics could not help but compare the refined irony the author introduced in *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the melodramatic speeches of the characters in *The Duchess of Padua*.

Like *Vera*, *The Duchess of Padua* may be regarded as an early experiment by Wilde in the theatre. Although critics may not have changed their standpoint on this tragedy, which is why the play is so rarely revived or studied, *The Duchess of Padua* presents characteristics that would later be transformed into Wilde‘s trademark.

3.2.3 *Salomé*

Salomé is Oscar Wilde‘s third play. It is a tragedy written in French in 1891. In 1894 an English translation was published and Lord Alfred Douglas‘ name appeared on the cover of the book as the translator, despite the fact that there were quarrels over the translation between him and Wilde. Although Douglas claimed that there were errors in Wilde‘s original play, his poor mastery of French would have made the text disastrous were it not for Wilde‘s intervention. In fact, Wilde corrected Douglas‘ mistakes in the translation, but, in a gesture of reconciliation, acknowledged Douglas as the translator rather than having them share their names on the title-page (ELLMAN, 1988, p. 373).

In the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 29 June 1892, Wilde explained why he had written *Salomé* in French:

> I have one instrument that I know I can command, and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it. [...] Of course, there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flemand by grace, writes in an alien language. The same thing is true of Rossetti, who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament (qtd in HENDERSON, 1907, p. 14).

Obviously, Wilde wanted to conduct new experiments in the field of drama, and he chose to do so writing in a less familiar language. As language is one of the bases for the construction of a theatrical text, by altering the foundation, Wilde would be changing several aspects of the play. Nonetheless, in this study the text that will be analysed is the English one. Since it is Wilde‘s own translation into the English language, it is still the original source of Wilde‘s writings that is being explored.

The one-act play tells the Biblical story of Salomé, stepdaughter of the tetrarch Herod Antipas, who requests the head of John the Baptist as a reward for dancing the dance of the seven veils. In Wilde‘s version, however, John the Baptist is called by his Greek name, Jokaanaan, and the reasons that lead Salomé to ask for Jokannan‘s head are completely different from those that led Herodias to request John the Baptist‘s head, as mentioned in the Bible.[8] Apart from the poetic license Wilde used

[8] According to the gospels of Matthew (14:1-12) and Mark (6:14-29), Herod, who was the tetrarch of Galilee under the Roman Empire, had imprisoned John the Baptist because he reproved Herod for divorcing his wife and unlawfully taking Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip I. On Herod's birthday, Herodias's daughter danced before the king and his guests. Her dancing pleased Herod so

in the plot of the play, he also changed the location of his play, for the biblical tale happens in Galilee, northern Israel, whereas Wilde‘s play is located in Judaea, in the south of Israel, as it can be seen in Wilde‘s stage direction at the end of the play: ‗*The SOLDIERS rush forward and crush beneath their shields SALOMÉ, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea*‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 605).

Rehearsals for the play‘s debut on the London stage, for its inclusion in Sarah Bernhardt‘s London season, began in 1892, but were interrupted when the Lord Chamberlain‘s licensor of plays banned *Salomé* on the basis that it was illegal to depict Biblical characters on the stage. The play was eventually premiered on 11 February 1896, in Paris at the Comédie-Parisienne in a staging by Lugné-Poe‘s theatre group, the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, while Wilde was in prison. A private performance of the play was arranged by the New Stage Club at the Bijou Theatre in Archer Street, London, on 10 and 13 May 1905. Nevertheless, the Lord Chamberlain‘s ban was not lifted for almost forty years and the first public performance of *Salomé* in England was only produced (by Nancy Price) on 5 October 1931, at the Savoy Theatre.

As the play was only to be performed publicly almost forty years after it was written, critics did not have the chance to assess its performance while Wilde was still alive. Even so, Nancy Thuleen, in an essay published on the internet, states that,

> [a]ttempting to categorize, analyze, or even describe Oscar Wilde‘s lyrical drama *Salomé* is a problematic issue and a source of contention amongst critics. To many, Wilde‘s willingness to appropriate themes and treatments of the Salomé legend from other authors of the period is a shortcoming; Wilde‘s play is labelled as ‗derivative‘ or a mere imitation. For others, it is precisely this fusion of different sources which gives strength to the drama, and Wilde is hailed as creative, innovative, and modern. The fact is that the Salomé legend was a logical choice for Wilde: one writer acknowledges that the Salomé/Herodias figure was almost as popular among nineteenth-century artists as the Virgin Mary was among medieval artists (1995).

According to Thuleen, Wilde aimed at experimenting working with raw material which had already been a source of inspiration to other artists. Actually, Wilde was a master at choosing a common subject and transforming it by adding his own touches to it. By changing the details, Wilde wrote a completely different story, for he altered the motivation of the plot.

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much that he promised to give her anything she desired, up to half of his kingdom. When the daughter asked her mother what she should request, she was told to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Although Herod was appalled by the request, he reluctantly agreed and had John executed in the prison.

In Wilde‘s version, Salomé, the eponymous heroine of the play, falls in love at first sight with Jokanaan. She longs to touch his hair, kiss his mouth and be looked at by him, none of which is she able to achieve, for Jokanaan is not interested in her. Infuriated at being despised, she dances the dance of the seven veils to the tetrarch in exchange for Jokanaan‘s head, whose mouth she is able to kiss after his death. As soon as Herod notices the grotesque kiss, he orders that Salomé be killed.

Different from the biblical version, in Wilde‘s *Salomé* all the characters are involved in conflicting relations to one another. Herodias is resentful of Herod‘s desire for Salomé, who in her turn, desires Jokanaan, who resists her lust while reproaching Herodias‘s incestuous behaviour.

On Wilde‘s play, at first, Salomé is depicted as an innocent and uncorrupted girl, who leaves Herod‘s feast to escape his fixed stare, which disgusts and embarrasses her. When Salomé leaves the banqueting hall, she claims she does not know the reason why her mother‘s husband keeps looking at her so avidly. While Salomé divagates about the guests in her stepfather‘s court, she observes the moon and is able to see the image of a cold and chaste virgin in the figure of the moon, identifying herself with the figure.

Suddenly, though, Salomé hears the cries of Jokanaan and she is seduced by the imprisoned prophet‘s voice. Subsequently she is determined to see the prophet whose voice has called her attention. Despite the warnings of the soldiers that Herod has forbidden anyone to talk to Jokanaan, Salomé has him taken out from his cistern, transgressing the order of the Tetrarch.

Her frigidity ceases when Jokanaan appears. She dismisses the trait of chastity that she had observed in the moon. Although all men have been hateful to her, Salomé lusts desperately after Jokanaan. She violently demands his look and his lips, which the prophet refuses to give her. Indeed, Salomé is insistent when it comes to her fierce desires. Throughout the play she concentrates her attention and energy on her longings: at first, she is focused on escaping from Herod‘s glares; then, she becomes intrigued by Jokanaan‘s voice and is determined to see him.

In order to fulfil her goal of seeing Jokanaan, Salomé manipulates the feelings of the Young Syrian for her. Promising that she will let fall a little green flower for him when she passes in her litter beneath the gateway, she tries to convince the Young Syrian to take Jokanaan out of the cistern. As the green flower artifice does not seem to have the required effect, she states she will look at the Young Syrian through the muslin veils when she passes besides him in her litter. Salomé even calls the Young Syrian by

his first name, Narraboth, so that she creates an atmosphere of intimacy which may lead him to grant her wish. Her ability to manipulate the Young Syrian is an indication of Salomé‘s selfishness, for she uses people to her own benefit.

As soon as Salomé persuades the Young Syrian to do her will, she has the opportunity to see Jokanaan and then she becomes obsessed by the idea of kissing the prophet, who despises her. Infuriated by Jokanaan‘s contempt, Salomé seizes the opportunity to revenge his scorn when the tetrarch promises he will offer her anything if she dances for him. Aware of Herod‘s desire for her, she manipulates the tetrarch through the dance of the seven veils. From a supposedly pure girl, she becomes a sly woman, for she does not reveal her wish to Herod before dancing. After she has danced for him, she demands what she wants, and she wants Jokanaan‘s head. The assumed innocence is replaced by her vindictive desire. Herod tries to persuade her to accept several other gifts, as he is afraid of killing the prophet, but Salomé is resolute to have the prophet‘s head.

Even though it seems like Salomé goes through a transformation – from a chaste virgin to a *femme fatale* – her lust does not appear from nowhere. From her first comment on the moon, it is already possible to see that Salomé‘s childish aspect is an image she wants to project of herself, since she already has thoughts about sexual relationships:

> SALOMÉ: How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses (WILDE, 2003, p. 586).

Wilde‘s choice of words is clearly ambiguous, for he does not want to openly reveal that Salomé already has the *femme fatale* inside her. Therefore, the words ‗defiled‘ and ‗abandoned‘ may both refer to sexual intercourse.

In all her acts and attitudes, Salomé reveals how self-centred she is, a woman who obeys her wishes and is governed by her whims. In the end, when Salomé picks up Jokanaan‘s head and kisses the corpse‘s mouth, a trait of madness is revealed as she crosses the taboo between the living and the dead. The scene demonstrates a grotesque necrophilia and brings down the judgment of the Tetrarch, who orders her execution:

> THE VOICE OF SALOMÉ: Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood... But perchance it is the taste of love... They say that love hath a bitter taste... But what of that? What of that? I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan.

> *A ray of moonlight falls on SALOMÉ and illumines her.*
> HEROD *(turning round and seeing SALOMÉ)*: Kill that woman! (WILDE, 2003, p. 605).

As Herod is disgusted and afraid, he does not want to stay on the terrace any longer, so he orders his soldiers to extinguish the fire of the torches to conceal the stars and the moon. Wilde‘ stage direction states that a cloud crosses the moon, concealing it completely. Therefore, the stage is almost completely dark when Herod starts climbing the staircase to the palace. Suddenly, a ray of moonlight falls on Salomé, allowing Herod to see her for the last time. Although Salomé had said that if any man sought to kill her, she would struggle, she is so focused on her desire that she does not notice Herod‘s disgusted and stunned look. She does not even hear the tetrarch orders to his soldiers, and is killed without any signs of resistance.

The fact that Wilde gave stage directions to darken the stage and provide a ray of light only on Salomé is not casual. Wilde knew exactly what kind of effect he wanted to create both on stage and in the audience. Through the game between concealing and revealing, the impression created in the audience when the moonlight strikes Salomé‘s kiss on Jokanaan‘s severed head is the same as Herod‘s: astonishment and disbelief. Salomé‘s desire is understood as an obsession which has taken such an extreme form that it can be interpreted as a symptom of psychosis. As the moonlight strikes Salomé, Herod is metaphorically reached by it too, for he has a sudden comprehension that he cannot allow Salomé to go free, after her wilful vengeance. He then orders his soldiers to kill her, so that she is erased from view. Herod will never again look at Salomé, for he feels that he is being punished for having looked too much at her, as his wife, Herodias, points out.

Herod is presented as a fearful sovereign, even though he does not publicly admit it until the end, when he requests his wife to hide in the palace with him, for he declares he begins to be afraid. As Jokanaan is dead and Herod realises that his fascination for Salomé has indirectly led things to their present state, he fears that Jokanaan‘s prophecies may come true as a means of punishment. Almost until the end of the play, when Herod guiltily reacts to what he imagines to be his punishment for looking avidly at Salomé, he does not seem to see the connection between sin and punishment mentioned by Jokanaan.

The disclosure meets Herod‘s apprehension in relation to Jokanaan‘s prophecies throughout the play. The audience is informed that Herod has imprisoned Jokanaan

because the prophet is said to have pointed out to Herod‘s sins. Jokanaan condemns Herod‘s marriage to Herodias, which is regarded as an incestuous union. In Wilde‘s version of the biblical story, the Tetrarch of Judea has deposed, imprisoned, and executed Salomé‘s father – his own brother and the former king – and married his brother‘s widow, Herodias. Herod is Salomé‘s uncle, but he has also become Salomé‘s stepfather through his marriage to Herodias. Therefore, his attraction for Salomé is even more wicked, for he has a blood relationship with her.

Herod is characterised as a sovereign who wants to conceal his problems from himself. His wish to be left untroubled has led him to imprison Jokanaan. In fact, Herod wants to silence Jokanaan, in order to prevent the prophet from predicting his ruin. Nonetheless, Jokanaan‘s words have already pervaded Herod‘s mind, and he is tormented by omens announcing that death is about to strike the palace. Desperate to forget the omens, Herod focuses his attention on his desire for Salomé – which is another sign of his wish to escape from his problems –, but his lust leads him to a fatal outcome.

Herod sees bad omens in several events, such as the blood of the young Syrian, in which the tetrarch steps, and the beating wings of the angel of death, which Herod assumes he has heard. All the bad omens perceived by Herod are conceived as signs of death and point to the deaths of the main characters. In fact, the image of death is constantly worked throughout the play and from the opening lines, when Herodias‘ page sees a dead woman in the figure of the moon.

The Page is the character who, captivated by the deadly moon, senses the impending death of his friend, the young Syrian, and regrets his suicide. Both of them have parallel speeches, which are similar in their form:

> THE YOUNG SYRIAN: How beautiful is the Princess Salomé to-night!
> THE PAGE OF HERODIAS: Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things.
> THE YOUNG SYRIAN: She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing.
> THE PAGE OF HERODIAS: She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly (WILDE, 2003, p. 583).

Whereas the Page is fascinated by the moon, the young Syrian is fascinated by Salomé, but the Page‘s interpretation of the moon‘s signs works as a harbinger of the Syrian‘s

fate. After the first sign of death appears in the predictions of the Page of Herodias, death becomes present in the suicide of the young Syrian, who has been seduced by Salomé‘s promise that she will look at him the following day through the muslin veils of her litter. As soon as the Young Syrian notices that he had been manipulated, for Salomé‘s interest lies in the prophet, the Syrian kills himself.

Death is present again when Salomé demands Jokanaan‘s head in return for dancing to Herod. In fact, while Salomé dances, she steps in the Young Syrian‘s blood, which may be interpreted in two ways: as a sign of her contempt for the Syrian‘s love for her, and as an indication that death has not finished its task yet, for Salomé dances to bring death to her loved one. Ultimately Salomé herself becomes the object of the moon‘s deadly stare. Once she is struck by a ray of moonlight, Herod orders his soldiers to kill her.

Since in all her comments about the moon Salomé identifies herself with it, a similarity between her and the moon is established. The moon presents a variation of colours whereas Salomé presents distinct moods. Just as Salomé is seen differently by each of the characters – the Young Syrian sees Salomé as a delicate and innocent princess; Herod sees her as a seductive woman; Jokanaan sees her as the personification of evil –, the moon is also seen in diverse perspectives – the Page of Herodias sees the moon as a dead woman; Salomé herself sees the moon as a chaste virgin; Herod, in his turn, regards the moon as a naked mad woman who is seeking lovers.

There is a parallel between the Young Syrian‘s perception of Salomé, and her perspective of the moon. Narraboth regards Salomé in the same way Salomé regards the moon: as a delicate and virginal princess. In the case of Herod, his perspective of the moon coincides with his view of Salomé. Herod sees his own desire for Salomé projected in the moon. The tetrarch‘s thoughts are pervaded by the same image both in relation to the moon and Salomé.

There is also a parallel between the point of view of the Page of Herodias of the moon and Jokanaan‘s view of Salomé. The Page of Herodias sees in the moon _a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 588), which is a signal of death coming to Narraboth through Salomé‘s deeds. Jokanaan, in his turn, sees Salomé as capable of profaning the temple of the Lord God, which she does indeed when she brings about his death.

Therefore, the moon and Salomé are the play‘s most overwhelming objects of the look, imagined in a seductive metaphorical association of concealment and

exhibition, represented by veils, clouds, wings, and fans, as they move slowly in a dance of death.

The connection between Salomé and the moon is extended towards Jokanaan as Wilde draws a parallel between the unearthly whiteness of Jokanaan‘s body, that of Salomé herself and the whiteness of the moon. Although Jokanaan spends much of the play in his subterranean prison, figuring only as a voice that prophesies the ruin of the kingdom, curses the royal family, and proclaims the coming of Christ, when he materialises on the terrace, his body is described as an _ivory statue‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 589), and it awakens Salomé‘s desire. She has never seen a whiter body, blacker hair, or a redder mouth.

Wilde‘s version of Saint John the Baptist appears on-stage and takes corporeal form, against his wishes, at Salomé‘s call. As soon as he is informed that Salomé is Herodias‘ daughter, he starts to condemn her for having such an infamous lineage:

> JOKANAAN: Cursed be thou! Daughter of an incestuous mother, be thou accursed!
> SALOMÉ: I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.
> JOKANAAN: I will not look at thee. I will not look at thee, thou art accursed, Salomé, thou art accursed *(He goes down into the cistern)* (WILDE, 2003, p. 591).

Like Salomé, Jokanaan is determined. He is faithful to his beliefs and is not led into temptation. He is firm in his purpose of not letting Salomé triumph over him. Hence, he does not surrender to her wish and never looks at her. Even when he is dead, his eyes are closed, showing that he was able to resist her appeal to the end.

Jokanaan loathes the queen Herodias, and he has slandered her as a futile incestuous harlot. A proud and unsympathetic queen, Herodias abhors the prophet and Jokanaan remains alive against her wishes. Despite the fact that she is not the instigator of Jokanaan‘s death, as in the biblical story, Herodias is delighted at his death in the face of her husband‘s horror.

Herodias is usually a major player in the Salomé legend, but less of a key figure in Wilde‘s play. She represents the antithesis of symbolic mysticism, placed in direct opposition to Herod, Salomé, and most of the other characters, who share a propensity for finding symbolism and omens in the world. Herodias scorns symbols. Thus, for example, when Herod sees a madwoman in the moon, she can only scoff: _No; the moon is like the moon, that is all. Let us go within... You have nothing to do here‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 592).

Herodias stands in direct opposition to her husband and defies his words. Through Herodias‘ character, it is possible to see how weak the Tetrarch is. He is not able to be taken seriously, for he is always confronted and satirised by her.

Herod makes a ridiculous figure for he is a fearful sovereign, like the Czar in *Vera, or The Nihilists*. Much of what he says is absurd, as in the following extract:

> FIRST NAZARENE: The daughter of Jairus was dead. He raised her from the dead.
> HEROD: He raises the dead?
> FIRST NAZARENE: Yea, sire, He raiseth the dead.
> HEROD: I do not wish Him to do that. I forbid Him to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This Man must be found and told that I forbid Him to raise the dead. Where is this Man at present?
> SECOND NAZARENE: He is in every place, my lord, but it is hard to find Him (WILDE, 2003, p. 595).

The Nazarenes are talking about Jesus‘ deeds and Herod sounds unreasonable since he imagines he has power over a man who raises the dead. As Herod is a sovereign, he wishes to convince himself that he holds power over every citizen of his kingdom. However, he is constantly defied by Herodias and even by his stepdaughter, Salomé, for neither of them obeys a single order he gives.

Even though Herodias does not hold Herod in great account, she is jealous of the attention her husband pays her daughter, as she does not want Salomé to dance for him. At these moments, it is possible to see that Herodias is also afraid of losing her position in the court, for she is not sure of Herod‘s love for her:

> HERODIAS: My daughter and I come of a royal race. As for thee, thy father was a camel driver! He was a thief and a robber to boot!
> HEROD: Thou liest!
> HERODIAS: Thou knowest well that it is true (WILDE, 2003, p. 593).

Herodias is much more worried about her own position than her husband‘s love. In fact, even though she claims that she and Salomé come of a royal race, she knows that, if the Tetrarch decides to replace her with another queen, she will have nowhere to go. That is the reason why she feels uncomfortable about Herod‘s gazing at Salomé.

In *Salomé* one sees Wilde‘s resourcefulness in dealing with such a harsh subject as the biblical story of the death of John the Baptist. Wilde adds some touches of humour which balance the tragedy and enable the play to be considered a complete piece of entertainment.

Critical Reviews

Although Wilde did not have the opportunity to read the reviews of *Salomé*'s premiere, the text of the play was widely discussed in critical circles, mainly after the Lord Chamberlain banned it from London stages. In fact, one critic's remark, in an unsigned review for the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 27 February 1893, is focused precisely on the reputation the play acquired after its restraint: "The suppression, prohibition, excommunication of any work of art or of anything professing to be a work of art always lends to the thing suppressed a kind of reputation' (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 135).

Indeed, of all Wilde's tragedies, *Salomé* is the one with the largest number of critical reviews, despite the fact that it is the only one that was not enacted while Wilde was alive. Critics were either delighted by the high quality of the play, or disgusted by Wilde's use of biblical characters.

Among those who approved of the decision of the Lord Chamberlain, there was a critic, who, in an unsigned review for *The Times*, published on 23 February 1893, said that *Salomé* "is an arrangement in blood and ferocity, morbid, *bizarre*, repulsive, and very offensive in its adaptation of scriptural phraseology to situations the reverse of sacred' (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 133). He was joined by other critics who thought that the subject addressed in the play was inappropriate.

On the other hand, Max Beerbohm, in a letter to Reginald Turner, was fascinated by Wilde's *Salomé*:

> [i]n construction it is very like a Greek play, I think: yet in conception so modern that its publication in any century would seem premature. It is a marvellous play. If Oscar would re-write *all* the Bible, there would be no sceptics. I say it is a marvellous play. It is a lovely present (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 134).

Among those who praised the play, the most commented aspects of the play were its treatment of the biblical story, as well as the musical quality of the play. William Archer, in a review reprinted in Karl Beckson's *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, praises the play, pointing out its musical quality: "[t]here is at least as much musical as pictorial quality in *Salomé*. It is by methods borrowed from music that Mr. Wilde, without sacrificing its suppleness, imparts to his prose the firm texture, so to speak, of verse' (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 142). Wilde himself often referred to the play in musical terms and asserted that it contains "refrains whose recurring motifs make it so

like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad‘ (qtd in CARPENTER, 1989, p. 92-3).

Wilde was not the only one to see a connection between this drama and music, and his version of the story has since spawned several other artistic works, the most famous of which is Richard Strauss‘s opera of the same name. Richard Strauss is said to have seen Wilde‘s play in Berlin in November 1902, at Max Reinhardt‘s ‗Little Theatre‘, and, as the play's formal structure was well-suited to musical adaptation, he began to compose his opera in summer 1903.

Partly due to the opera‘s success, Wilde‘s text became widely known and his drama was produced in several European cities, despite the fact that it could not be staged in Britain until 1931. Since its London premiere, however, *Salomé* has had eleven revivals in England from 1931 to 2010,[9] which shows that it is Wilde‘s most popular tragedy, although it has not been nearly as successful as his comedies.

[9] According to Professor Peter James Harris‘ table of presentation of Irish dramas in London‘s stages (HARRIS, 2011).

4. Oscar Wilde's Comedies

In this chapter, the focus is on Oscar Wilde‘s comedies, which he wrote between 1892 and 1895. Wilde‘s comedies were his last dramatic works, and unlike his tragedies, the comedies were all commercially successful. Among the critics, though, this was a little different, for some of Wilde‘s works were widely reviewed, and others almost not at all.

Even so, it is impossible to think about conducting an analysis without considering anything that has been said before about his works. This does not mean that this analysis will be so broad as to include all kinds of lines of analyses – which would make it unfeasible –, but only those to which this study will be indebted. Clearly, as each of Oscar Wilde‘s works is a rich piece of art, it will never be possible to exhaust every topic for potential analysis.

Firstly, however, there will be a comment on some general characteristics of Wilde‘s comedies. Although his tragedies share some common elements, it is in the comedies that it is possible to notice how Wilde reiterates some models, – whether those he adapted from other writers or those he created himself – according to which each play is arranged.

Next, there will be a commentary on each comedy which will follow the same scheme as that used in the analysis of the tragedies: the main structural and linguistic aspects will be included and some comments will be made about the play‘s critical reception.

4.1 General Characteristics

Most critics point out that Wilde used as a model for his comedies the ‗well-made play‘, which is a dramatic genre from the nineteenth-century theatre that was created and developed by the French dramatists Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou. According to Joseph Loewenstein, in an article entitled ‗Wilde and the Evasion of Principle‘, collected in *Oscar Wilde: A Colletction of Critical Essays* (1996), ‗The well-made play is characterised precisely by that calculation of scheme and coincidence, that trick of falling into place‘ (LOEWENSTEIN, 1996, p. 117), which is such a feature of Wilde‘s comedies.

Even if Wilde used the moulds of the well-made play with its ingenious construction of plots and artificial devices that appealed to the masses – and which would of itself explain his commercial success –, he did not exploit it without refining it according to his own criteria. According to Epifanio San Juan Jr., _Wilde's comedies embody the melodramatic and farcical strains of the fashionable, _well-made' play – but with a difference. Commentators have noticed in his plays the disparity between speech and action, the disharmony between conventional action and the unconventional characters and their speeches' (JUAN JR., 1985, p. 46). In fact, Wilde used the well-made play as a platform both to entertain and criticise the very audience who attended the performances of his comedies. Actually, this double standard was only possible because of other supporting elements used by Wilde, such as the dialogue and the dandy, that typical character from the *Fin de Siècle*.

In reality, Wilde did not only use the well-made play as a starting point, but also employed features of both farce and melodrama. Several critics deal with the issue of the mixing of genres in his works, but Richard Allen Cave stresses the consciousness of this device in his chapter entitled _Wilde's plays: some lines of influence', published in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*:

> Wilde is perfectly in control of his dramatic artistry: what he is depicting is a society that is all surface in respect of its manners and mores; there are no secure values for coping with what lies behind the façade. The tonal insecurity has a precise satirical purpose. How is one to judge the antics of these characters? Whether one views them as comic, melodramatic or farcical is all a question of one's own perspective. The technique provocatively challenges degrees of self-awareness in the engaged spectator (CAVE, 2009, p. 226).

Therefore, each critic's own perspective will determine if Wilde's plays are analysed as a melodrama, as a farce, as a satire or as a well-made play. In fact, the mixing of genres in the comedies enriches them, rather than being a source of weakness.

San Juan Jr. argues that the supporting element that makes it possible to see the comedies as satires is the dialogue. He argues that a critic should go beyond plot and character to apprehend the distinctive qualities of Wildean satire. For San Juan Jr., the verbal texture, that is, the linguistic aspects, with their multiple connotations, is the most important element in the play, for language interweaves all other aspects of the comedy.

However, there are other critics who comment on Wilde's objective of unifying the concept of theatre in such a way as to make each of its elements capable of denoting

meaning. Some of these critics support the idea that the unifying element is a literary school, which may vary from humanism to modernism.

Other critics do not point out to a unifying element. Instead, they see the theatrical aspects as capable of manifesting Wilde's ideas as a whole. These critics not only address the importance of textual and theatrical components, such as dialogue, plot and characterisation, but also performative constituents. Some of these aspects are present in the texts of the plays, whether in the dialogues or in the stage directions. However, some of them can only be observed when the plays are being enacted, and they can be altered according to the director's choices. These changeable aspects are not going to be analysed in this study, for, here, the main focus is the literary facets of Wilde's dramatic works. Thus, colour, design, setting, music and movement are only going to be mentioned as they appear in stage directions.

Another common feature of Wilde's comedies is the afore mentioned special character, the dandy. Although in the tragedies there are characters who have similar characteristics to those of the dandy, it is in the comedies that this special character becomes Wilde's trademark.

Some critics identify the dandy with the authorial stance, and affirm that Wilde depicts himself in his plays through the figure of this special character. San Juan Jr. (1985) comments on the role of the Wildean dandy as follows:

> [t]orn between his contempt for empty social value and his desire to be accepted and praised by society, Wilde is supposed to have created plays in which the issues and problems are illogically posed and left unsolved or unresolved. For example, Arthur Ganz, in exploring this idea of Wilde's —divided self" (better, split sympathies), contends that Wilde —could not write as the ordinary satirist does, for where the satirist admires a social norm and ridicules deviations from it, the Wildean dandy is himself a deviation and ridicules the social norm". The only form of a resolution in the plays can be found in the dandiacal joke, where external and formal manners triumph over internal moods and morals (p. 47).

According to this view, the dandy can be considered a different kind of satirical character, for he is able to utter the most paradoxical statements and still his words are going to be congruent within the internal logic of the plays. In the comedies, the dandy plays a fundamental role in terms of entertainment and criticism, whereas in the tragedies the dandiacal features presented in some characters help to add lightness to the serious texts.

As mentioned by San Juan Jr., the essay written by Arthur Ganz, _The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of Oscar Wilde‘ (1969), points to Wilde‘s _divided self‘ as the two patterns of characters that appears in all his society comedies, that is, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*. As Ganz elucidates, in these three comedies there are two opposite kinds of character: the Philistine and the dandy. The Philistine is a category of typically comprising characters who have committed a sin in the past and want society‘s forgiveness. The dandy is a category composed of characters who disdain society‘s rules and create their own set of principles, through which they judge society themselves. Ganz sees the recurrence of these two opposite categories as a manifestation of Wilde‘s divided self, that is, he would be personally divided between these tendencies, which are reflected in his works. Ganz claims that Wilde‘s Philistine characters ask for forgiveness in the same way he does for his homosexuality, for he tries to show to society that sin does not necessarily turn someone into a bad person. The dandy, on the other hand, scorns society‘s values, for he/she does not wish to be limited by it. Consequently, the dandy is not seen by Ganz as a pose adopted by Wilde, but as a result of an internal conflict in his own personal life.

Although the considerations made by Arthur Ganz may be considered correct, to see Wilde‘s Philistine and dandy characters only as a reflection of his personal conflicts is to limit them unnecessarily. Wilde does indeed ask for society‘s forgiveness in the figure of his Philistine characters, but, by showing the audience that a person who has sinned cannot be seen as completely corrupt, he is also trying to transform their values. Wilde is not humbly bending to society‘s rules, but, rather, is attempting to demonstrate that its strict point of view is limited and narrow-minded. Even when he seems to be rendering himself, Wilde is pointing to the fragility of the Victorian principles.

Apart from the dandy, there are also some regular types of characters, who appear in most of Wilde‘s comedies. San Juan Jr. gives some examples:

> [w]e have in Wilde‘s comedies [...] the woman with the past: Mrs Erlynne and Mrs Arbuthnot. On the other hand, Sir Robert Chiltern and Jack Worthing nourish a past which later comes to affect their lives by some twist of circumstance, by some inscrutable concourse of events. Both sets of characters realise their true identity, in a sense, by sharing the knowledge of their past with other people. Counterposed to these —guilty” personages is the judicial role of the strict Puritan obsessed with categorical —good” and —evil”: witness Lady Windermere, Hester Worsley, Lady Chiltern. Lady Bracknell, in this group, stands out by reason of her —radiacal” or witty predilections (1985, p.48).

These types of character would help Wilde to establish an archetype for Victorian society, and, along with their speech, marked by the use of witticisms, create the adequate mocking tone Wilde was so fond of using.

Wilde‘s use of wit and epigram is also one of his trademarks, as it appears not only in the comedies, but also in his tragedies. In relation to Wilde‘s use of epigrams, San Juan Jr. (1985) also comments that,

> [a]lthough he has no serious plot and no really credible character, Wilde achieves a peculiar effect in counterpointing agile criticism with the absurdities of action. Thus one can hardly catch his ―philosophy" in order to approve or denounce it. The irony involves the contrast between ―the elegance and savoir-faire of the actors and the absurdity of what they actually do". This contrast, integral to the plays, is Wilde‘s efficient vantage point for ridiculing the aristocracy. The aristocrat‘s smooth, solid appearance reflecting inner emptiness is matched by the inversions of standards so as to disclose what these standards really mean: earnestness is equated with false seriousness, priggishness with hypocrisy, etc (JUAN JR., 1985, p. 50).

Every time Wilde depicts society in his comedies, his irony is aimed at two targets: entertainment and destabilisation of self-image. It functions as if Wilde could say to his audience that he is able to see through the gaps of their much-prized solid appearance. In the tragedies, however, depicting members of society does not aim exactly at making the audience laugh. Instead, it works mostly as a tool of social criticism. Nonetheless, Wilde‘s use of wit and epigram in his tragedies sometimes coincides with portrayals of high society members, and in such cases, social criticism appears with a cover of amusement.

As we can see, Wilde presents some regular patterns in his work in the comedies, which not only tells more about the comedies themselves, but also about Wilde‘s work as a playwright. The vision of Wilde as a dramatist who intended to produce works of art which had a unifying meaning is now going to be addressed in each play individually.

4.2 *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

Lady Windermere’s Fan is Oscar Wilde‘s first comedy, premiered on 22 February 1892, but only published in 1893. After the critical and public failure of his first three dramas, Wilde, at the request of Sir George Alexander, the actor manager of St James‘s Theatre, turned to comedy and wrote his fourth play. By October 1891 the

play was finished and he offered it to Alexander. Alexander liked the comedy, and he and Wilde began exhaustive revisions and rehearsals of the play.

Although both were talented artists with strong ideas about their art, Alexander was a meticulous manager and he insisted on some changes in the plot. Wilde, in his turn, emphasised aesthetic minutiae rather than realism; he resisted Alexander‘s suggested broad stage movements. Nonetheless, after the opening night, at the suggestion of friends and Alexander himself, Wilde made changes to reveal Mrs Erylnne‘s relationship with Lady Windermere gradually throughout the play, rather than reserving the secret for the final act. Despite their artistic differences, both Wilde and Alexander were professional and their collaboration was a fruitful one.

The premiere at the St James‘s Theatre was followed by a notorious speech given by Wilde. When Wilde answered the calls of „Author!‘ and appeared before the curtains after the fourth act, critics were said to be more offended by the cigarette in his hand than by his egotistical speech, which was reproduced in Richard Ellman‘s biography:

> Ladies and Gentlemen. I have enjoyed this evening *immensely*. The actors have given us a *charming* rendition of a *delightful* play, and your appreciation has been most intelligent. I congratulate you on the *great* success of your performance, which persuades me that you think *almost* as highly of the play as I do myself (qtd in ELLMAN, 1988, p. 366).

Not only through the play but also in his final speech, Wilde showed that he was above all a conversationalist. He was able to both entertain and flatter his audience.

Like many of Wilde‘s subsequent comedies, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* satirises the morals of Victorian society, particularly marriage. The plot revolves around a series of misunderstandings and deceptions in London‘s high society and the comedy is said to mock and praise the spectators, which made it particularly appreciated by theatre-goers.

The plot tells the history of Lady Windermere, who on her twenty-first birthday receives from her husband, Lord Windermere, a fan as a birthday gift. Soon after receiving the symbolic fan, Lady Windermere is told some gossip and begins to suspect that her husband is cheating on her with a Mrs Erlynne. As Lord Windermere insists on bringing Mrs Erlynne to his wife‘s birthday party, Lady Windermere threatens to strike her antagonist with her fan. She does not do that, though. Instead, Lady Windermere feels convinced that she should leave her husband and child to be with a man who supposedly loves her: Lord Darlington. Unsure if leaving her husband and child is the

best decision, Lady Windermere leaves her house when her birthday party is almost at the end. However, Mrs Erlynne notices Lady Windermere‘s absence and discovers a letter from Lady Windermere to her husband. Mrs Erlynne intercepts the letter and, after suggesting to the audience that she is actually Lady Windermere‘s mother, goes to Lord Darlington‘s house to convince Lady Windermere to come back. Both Mrs Erlynne and Lady Windermere are alone in Lord Darlington‘s house, for he has gone with his friends to his club. Mrs Erlynne, without telling her daughter the true kinship between them, assures Lady Windermere that she is not involved in a love affair with Lord Windermere. When Mrs Erlynne has finally convinced Lady Windermere, the men suddenly arrive from the club, and both women try to hide from them. Nonetheless, the men soon discover Lady Windermere‘s fan lying on the sofa and Lord Windermere and Lord Darlington start to quarrel over it. In order to save her daughter‘s marriage, Mrs Erlynne sacrifices her own reputation, for she reveals herself to the male characters, allowing Lady Windermere to escape without being noticed. When Lady Windermere discovers what Mrs Erlynne has done, she gratefully recognises that she should not categorise people as good or bad, for individuals can present nuances not always perceptible on the surface. Lady Windermere then gives the fan to Mrs Erlynne as a sign of recognition of the rival‘s kindness towards her.

In the final scene, Lord Augustus tells the Windermeres that he is going to get married to Mrs Erlynne. Lady Windermere‘s and Lord Windermere‘s comments on Lord Augustus‘ news are revealing: ‗LORD WINDERMERE: Well, you are certainly marrying a very clever woman! / LADY WINDERMERE *(taking her husband's hand)*: Ah, you're marrying a very good woman!‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 464). Wilde‘s choice of the characters‘ use of adjectives informs the spectators and readers of the play the thoughts of both the Windermeres. Lord Windermere thinks that Mrs Erlynne is capable of manipulating Lord Augustus through lies and other tricks, such as charm, tears and the like. Lord Windermere even states that he would not allow himself to be fooled like Lord Augustus if he had found the woman to whom he was to be married in another man‘s house in the middle of the night. In Lord Windermere‘s opinion, whereas Mrs Erlynne may be considered clever and cunning, Lord Augustus is a dupe, for his judgment on Mrs Erlynne is regarded as deficient and unwise. Lady Windermere‘s opinion is quite the opposite, for she thinks that Mrs Erlynne has an altruistic character, capable of being truly concerned about the welfare of others. From Lady Windermere‘s point of view, Lord Augustus could not have chosen more wisely, for he will get

married to a woman who is upright and decent. As Lady Windermere takes her husband‘s hand before she announces her opinion, her gesture is imbued with meaning. It shows that she has grown mature enough to hold an opinion completely different from her husband‘s and still be by his side. Lady Windermere‘s act of holding hands with Lord Windermere also reveals that in the end she has chosen him to spend her life with, even if it means that she will have to keep her visit to Lord Darlington‘s rooms a secret in order to maintain her marriage safe.

It can be seen that the plot revolves around events that do not actually happen and, at the end of the play, many secrets are still kept: Lady Windermere does not act on her plan to abandon her husband. She initially goes to Lord Darlington‘s house, but she regrets this and returns home, without having her escapade revealed by Mrs Erlynne, who is the only one who is aware of it. Mrs Erlynne, for her part, does not fulfil her objective of living in London, as she decides to leave the city after she discovers her motherly feelings for Lady Windermere. Moreover, Mrs Erlynne‘s identity is not revealed, as Lord Windermere is the only one who knows it, and she blackmails him in order to keep her secret safe. Thus, at the end of the play, Mrs Erlynne is the only character who knows everything that has happened in the course of the preceding twenty-four hours, and she keeps it to herself, for she seems to think that the relationship between the Windermeres will be sustained as long as she remains silent.

As Mrs Erlynne sacrifices her reputation in order to preserve her daughter‘s, Lady Windermere changes her opinion about her. The change undergone by Lady Windermere is a sign of maturity. As she has turned twenty-one years old, she is forced to come of age by the events that happen in her life in the course of twenty-four hours. Therefore, her twenty-first birthday becomes a turning point in her life. At the beginning of the play, Lady Windermere, the protagonist, is presented as a character whose behaviour is unblemished. At the beginning of the first act, she is visited by Lord Darlington and she makes it clear to him that she is not comfortable with the compliments he insists on paying her. As a married woman, Lady Windermere seems to think it is not right to be paid so many compliments by a man who is not her husband. In fact, she has a very strong moral sense, which is basically justified by her upbringing by her aunt Julia, who taught her the difference between right and wrong. Lady Windermere declares she does not allow any concessions with regard to this difference, which defines her as a strict character.

Over the course of the play, though, Lady Windermere seems to go through a process of uncertainties and hesitation, which defines her behaviour. At first she is sure that people are either good or bad and that she has a perfect marriage. Then, she assumes her husband is betraying her, based on gossip she has been told and further having confirmed that he has paid large sums of money to another woman. Because of that, she is no longer so sure of her happiness. Subsequently she discovers she can no longer stand being humiliated and leaves her husband and child for Lord Darlington. Nevertheless, she is still in doubt about her decision and is ready to return home, when she is confronted by Mrs Erlynne. Based on her feelings for that woman, Lady Windermere makes up her mind and stands by her choice to leave her husband. However, she is convinced by Mrs Erlynne that this is not the best thing to do and reverses her decision precisely when Lord Darlington and his friends, including Lord Windermere, arrive at the house. She seizes the opportunity to escape without knowing what might happen. The next day, she is still uncertain about the events in Lord Darlington‘s house and is anxious to tell her husband the truth. Once more, she is not sure if this is the best course to follow, and later she is advised not to do so. Even though she seems unsteady in her attitudes, it is these uncertainties which give her the chance to change her mind and mature her way of thinking:

> LADY WINDERMERE: Arthur, Arthur, don‘t talk so bitterly about any woman. I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don‘t think Mrs Erlynne a bad woman – I know she‘s not (WILDE, 2003, p. 456).

Almost at the end of the play, Lady Windermere shows she has learned an important lesson: people do not fit into watertight categories, for they can be at the intersection, that is, they can present characteristics from opposite categories simultaneously. In fact, the most important lesson Lady Windermere has learned in her life, at her 21 years of age, is taught to her by her mother‘s sacrifice. After all, children learn more from their parents‘ attitudes than from their words.

Lady Windermere is not the only one to change her position towards Mrs Erlynne. Lord Windermere is also affected by Mrs Erlynne‘s attitudes, which makes him change his mind in relation to his mother-in-law. At the beginning of the play, Lady Windermere thinks she has nothing to do with Mrs Erlynne. At the end, it is Lord

Windermere who thinks that the two women have nothing in common. Whereas Lady Windermere perceives a similarity between herself and her mother, Lord Windermere starts to believe that he was mistaken to take Mrs Erlynne as a well-intentioned woman. After all, Lord Windermere is the only main character that fits the ‚good' category Lady Windermere has created to judge society, for all his actions are carried out in order to benefit his wife.

When Lord Windermere surrenders to Mrs Erlynne's blackmail, he is trying to protect his wife from the sorrow and shame of knowing that her mother is an outcast. At the end, when he believes that Mrs Erlynne is in fact a sordid woman, he does not want to allow her in his house, for he thinks that he has to protect Lady Windermere from the bad influence Mrs Erlynne may represent to her daughter.

As Lord Windermere is depicted as an upright character, he cannot be allowed to know the truth about his wife's trip to Lord Darlington's house in the middle of the night. He starts the play as a man who makes concessions to other people's mistakes, and he is ready to pardon Mrs Erlynne and is willing to help her to be admitted in society again. Nonetheless, he finishes the play as a rigorous character, for after finding Mrs Erlynne in Lord Darlington's rooms, he reaches unwarranted conclusions.

The only characteristic that remains unaltered in Lord Windermere is the fact that he remains faithful to Lady Windermere and never tells her the entire truth only to spare her from suffering:

> LORD WINDERMERE *(calling after her)*: Margaret! Margaret! *(A pause)* My God! What shall I do? I dare not tell her who this woman really is. The shame would kill her *(Sinks down into a chair and buries his face in his hands.)* (WILDE, 2003, p. 432).

In this extract, it is clear that Lord Windermere is more worried about his wife's happiness than about his own reputation, for he does not elucidate his relation to Mrs Erlynne in order to deny his wife's accusations. Instead, he lets Lady Windermere go and seems undecided whether he should tell the whole truth about Mrs Erlynne, having to deal with his wife's shame and disgrace, or keep Mrs Erlynne's secret in order to spare Lady Windermere from being disappointed about who her mother really is. As he is blackmailed by Mrs Erlynne not to tell the truth about her to Lady Windermere, Lord Windermere is spared from making the decision that could affect his wife's life.

Although at first Lady Windermere thinks she has nothing in common with Mrs Erlynne, the course of events in the play reveals that both have many more similarities

than might have been expected. Both Mrs Erlynne and Lady Windermere are driven to make the same decisions and commit the same mistakes, as pointed out by Mrs Erlynne:

> MRS ERLYNNE: No, no! It would be impossible! Life doesn‘t repeat its tragedies like that! Oh, why does this horrible fancy come across me? Why do I remember now the one moment of my life I most wish to forget? Does life repeat its tragedies? *(Tears letter open and reads it, then sinks down into a chair with a gesture of anguish)* Oh, how terrible! The same words that twenty years ago I wrote to her father! and how bitterly I have been punished for it! No; my punishment, my real punishment is to-night, is now! (WILDE, 2003, p. 443).

After discovering that her daughter is about to spoil her happiness based on a false belief, Mrs Erlynne suffers to see that she really cares about her daughter‘s happiness. As a mother, Mrs Erlynne does not want her daughter to go through the same process she endured when she abandoned her husband and child twenty years previously. Mrs Erlynne was impulsive once and now discovers that her impulsiveness also exists in her daughter, as if Lady Windermere had inherited her traits of character.

Mrs Erlynne surprises herself and the audience when she shows she has maternal instincts, mainly because her driving force has always been her impulsiveness. Mrs Erlynne was impulsive enough to abandon her husband and child and, even though she has suffered the consequences of her mistakes, she has not ceased to be impulsive, for she is driven by her wish to recover her reputation, regardless of the consequences her acts may have upon her daughter‘s life. Nonetheless, when she discovers that she may be considered the reason why Lady Windermere abandoned her husband and child, Mrs Erlynne sacrifices her newly acquired good reputation in order to save her daughter‘s, preventing Lady Windermere from destroying both her marriage and her happiness. Once more, Mrs Erlynne makes her decision quickly, out of impulsiveness rather than rationality.

The following day, after her act of altruism, Mrs Erlynne is quite afraid of her feelings and states that a heart does not suit her. That is the reason why she is leaving England to live entirely abroad and she promises never to come back to the Windermeres‘ lives:

> MRS ERLYNNE: Oh, don‘t imagine I am going to have a pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am, and all that kind of thing. I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother‘s feelings. That was last night. They were terrible – they made me suffer – they made me suffer too much. For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless, – I want to live childless still. *(Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh.)* Besides, my dear Windermere, how on earth could I pose as a mother with a

> grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one, and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most. Twenty-nine when there are pink shades, thirty when there are not (WILDE, 2003, p. 459-60).

Mrs Erlynne seems cold when she states she does not want to identify herself to her daughter, mainly for a matter of appearances, as she claims. However, due to her concern for Lady Windermere‘s feelings, one sees that Mrs Erlynne is wearing a mask. Another remarkable point is Wilde‘s stage direction, in which there is a clear indication to the interpreter of Mrs Erlynne‘s role that she should laugh trivially in order to try to hide the character‘s feelings. After all, Mrs Erlynne does have a heart that suits her. However, she is afraid of admitting it. It is not only a question of considering herself more fragile because of her feelings. Mrs Erlynne is afraid of being exposed to the same conditions she had to face in the past when she followed her heart. Her past experiences have hardened her and she is afraid of breaking the walls she has built to protect her heart.

Mrs Erlynne‘s discovery of her hidden feelings makes her seem quite serious. However, throughout the play she adopts a much lighter tone, and her speech is filled with witticisms and epigrams, and she may even be considered a dandy, for she presents many dandiacal characteristics. Mrs Erlynne wears a mask of triviality throughout the play, and her seriousness is only revealed when her feelings for her daughter appear. Nonetheless, in order to protect herself from the feelings she is so afraid of, she disguises her sincerity by using an artificial tone. When confronted by Lord Windermere at the end of the play, Mrs Erlynne assures him she will not reveal her true identity to her daughter. Mrs Erlynne justifies herself by using the argument that she has never admitted to being older than thirty. Her comment on the importance she gives to appearances and how anxious she is to be considered young marks her return to the position she has hold since the beginning of the play: that of a woman who thinks that _life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 425). Although this line is the definition Lord Darlington gives in the first act, Mrs Erlynne behaves as if she had always thought the same way as him. From his definition, Lord Darlington may be also perceived as a dandy. His speech is filled with epigrams and witticisms, and he has the most ironic lines in the play. He mocks society and overvalues his own intelligence, revealing a self-conceited trait. Although he is interested in Lady Windermere, he has a completely opposite view to hers in relation to morality.

In the first act, when Lord Darlington is visiting Lady Windermere before her birthday party, she claims that she knows Lord Darlington pretends to be bad, to which he does not disagree. When he is asked by Lady Windermere why he pretends to be bad, he justifies himself by saying:

> LORD DARLINGTON [...]: Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad. Besides, there is this to be said. If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn‘t. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism (WILDE, 2003, p. 422).

Lord Darlington‘s words reveal that he is so vain that he wants to be considered modest by not having the pretension to be regarded as a good person. By pretending to be bad and being good all the time, Lord Darlington assumes that he is not only being good, but he is also being humble. As he mentions that he does not want to be taken seriously, he confirms that he considers himself superior to others. Lord Darlington thinks that being mistaken, both as bad and trivial, gives him an advantage, for he keeps his real nature to himself.

Even though Lord Darlington states that he is fond of pretending to be bad, throughout the play his attitudes show that he does in fact have a bad character. At the beginning of the play, he approaches Lady Windermere to take advantage of her fragility. Knowing the gossip about Lord Windermere‘s affair with Mrs Erlynne, Lord Darlington goes to the Windermeres‘ house and volunteers to be a faithful friend to Lady Windermere in case she needs one. Later, Lady Windermere feels she needs a friend, but when she goes to Lord Darlington, he declares she cannot count on him for that, because he loves her and does not believe that true friendship can exist between a man and a woman. As he sees she is vulnerable, he pressures her to take an immediate decision: she must leave her husband and come to live abroad with him. As she tells him that she is not sure whether she should do that or not, he declares they will never meet again, for he is travelling the following day. Having said that, Lord Darlington leaves the Windermeres‘ house and Lady Windermere is left alone, feeling lonely and forsaken. She does not have her husband‘s support and is left unassisted by the only person who had offered to be a great friend.

As a dandy, Lord Darlington does not allow other people to penetrate either his personality or his identity, and he remains an enigma. In fact, he remains a puzzle even to his closest friends and does not reveal to them the identity of the woman with whom

he is in love. As he hopes that Lady Windermere abandons her husband for him, he delivers the most famous line in the play, a line which summarises the main theme: _[w]e are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 451). His friends easily conclude that he is in love, but he refuses to disclose the identity of his loved one.

At the end, his expectations are frustrated by Mrs Erlynne‘s interference. Lord Darlington is one more character who does not know the entire truth about the events of the previous night. He is neither aware that Lady Windermere has gone to his house, nor that her fan was factual evidence of her decision of her having abandoned her husband, a decision which she reversed after being convinced not to leave her child.

Lord Darlington is depicted as a trivial character from the beginning, and even if he seems quite serious when he speaks of his feelings for Lady Windermere, the most mocking scenes of the play involve his presence. Lord Darlington‘s friends are also quite witty, and their conversation in Lord Darlington‘s rooms is one of the funniest in the play. San Juan Jr. (1985) argues that _the exchanges of the dandies in Lord Darlington‘s room in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* [are an example of how] verbal wit culminates in the mathematical finesse with which maxims and epigrams are lined up in smooth sequence‘ (JUAN JR., 1985, p. 46, note added). According to the critic, Wilde worked the lines of several characters with such subtlety that even a scene filled with sarcastic comments, such as that in Lord Darlington‘s rooms, has an even consistency, that is, it is uniformly arranged.

The scene San Juan Jr. indicates as the one which exemplifies the epigrammatic verbal exchanges between the characters is also an example of male behaviour in Victorian society, which is portrayed in a delightful ironic manner. The first aspect of male behaviour depicted in the scene is the fact that all the men leave the Windermeres‘ house and go to a club, where women are not allowed. Spending the end of the night in a club was quite a common habit among high society men in Victorian Era. When they reach Lord Darlington‘s house, having been turned out from the club, they spend time chatting, having cigarettes and playing cards. Represented in trivial activities, men are given the ideal background to support their light conversation, which shows Wilde‘s mastery of theatrical elements in order to fill the dialogue with witticisms and epigrams. Whereas they sound insignificant, the characters‘ comments hold criticism in relation to aspects of society. Such is the case of Cecil Graham‘s distinction between scandal and gossip:

> CECIL GRAHAM: Oh! gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality. Now, I never moralise. A man who moralises is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralises is invariably plain. There is nothing in the whole world so unbecoming to a woman as a Nonconformist conscience. And most women know it, I'm glad to say (WILDE, 2003, p. 451).

As Cecil Graham points out that people who moralise are typically hypocrites, he is uttering Wilde‘s own scornful observation on Victorian morals. Cecil Graham‘s line can be seen as Wilde‘s subtle criticism, for it is set as a remark made by a secondary character concealed by a cover of entertainment, which in fact holds a denunciation of society double standards.

As in the case of Wilde‘s tragedies, his first comedy also presents some marks that help to predict the events that are about to happen in the course of the play. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* the fan of the protagonist plays an important part in suggesting to the audience what to expect from the story.

At first, Lady Windermere is happy that she has received the fan as a birthday gift from her husband, and it represents their union and love. When Lord Windermere insists on inviting Mrs Erlynne to Lady Windermere‘s birthday party, though, the fan acquires a new meaning as Lady Windermere promises to strike Mrs Erlynne‘s face with it. Nonetheless, when Mrs Erlynne arrives at Lady Windermere‘s birthday party, Lady Windermere does not have courage to make a scene and drops the fan. The dropping of the fan denotes that Lady Windermere‘s high morality pattern is about to fall too. The fan works firstly as an indication of Lady Windermere‘s abandonment of her husband and child. Secondly, it works as a symbol of Lady Windermere‘s revaluation of her moral categories.

When the fan is found in Lord Darlington‘s rooms it becomes the symbol of Lady Windermere‘s betrayal, and Lord Windermere starts a quarrel with Lord Darlington over it. After Mrs Erlynne claims she has taken the fan in mistake for her own, the fan symbolizes Mrs Erlynne‘s sacrifice for her daughter. At the end, Mrs Erlynne asks Lady Windermere for the fan as a gift, and Lady Windermere agrees to give it to her, in a sign of recognition and gratitude. The fan recovers the status of an object that represents a love relationship, at least on Mrs Erlynne‘s part, who knows that she loves her daughter so much that she was capable of sacrificing her reputation to save Lady Windermere‘s marriage and happiness.

The fan can be regarded as an emblem both of the plot twists and the changes occurring in the characters‘ points of view. It is the most iconic object in the play, for it acquires different meanings according to the alterations suffered by the characters. The fan is mentioned in the title of the play due to its great importance in the development of the plot.

Critical Reviews

After the opening night, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* received several critical reviews, some of them focusing precisely on Wilde‘s attitude towards the audience in his final speech. Clement Scott was one of the critics who were outraged by Wilde‘s conduct, along with other playwrights‘ ‗condescension‘ in the way they received Wilde. He was so indignant, that he directed his whole review to the fact that, to him, Wilde seemed cynical in both his way of picturing society and addressing it personally. Nevertheless, most reviews focus their criticism on two other points: the characters‘ lack of morals (mainly because of Mrs Erlynne‘s lack of repentance); and the fact that the majority of the characters in the play seem to talk just like the author.

Regarding the characters‘ lack of morals, the critics‘ analyses inevitably involve the concept of art criticism of the Victorian Era. Morality was among the criteria used to judge the quality of a work of art, and its lack would represent a failure in creating a true work of art. As most critics were inserted in this context, it would not be possible for Wilde‘s works to be considered good enough to escape traditional criticism.

In relation to the second most criticised point, the similarity of the characters to Wilde himself, it is worth stressing that this is Wilde‘s comedic signature. It is precisely the verbal wit that makes his dialogues flow in such a way as to divert and entertain his audience. In this respect, San Juan Jr. (1985) states that

> [t]he delightful make-believe that is the substance of Wilde‘s comedies draws strength chiefly from the effervescent wit and the mental alertness that inform the dialogue. This is conveyed by the easy, graceful prose. The idiom Wilde assigns to his characters, though often out of character, serves as a versatile instrument both for simple fun and serious mockery. Perhaps Wilde was just too clever and smart in the exercise of his histrionic power; he exhibits too ‗wildly‘ his penchant for ‗posing‘ (p. 46).

San Juan Jr. seems to interpret Wilde‘s attitude as a way of covering his real intentions. Wilde‘s pose may be regarded as a way of protecting himself from criticism, for it

enables him to argue that all the criticism he inserts in his texts is a mere pose. Wilde‘s ability to fill the characters‘ speech with wit and epigram is a resourceful tool which allows Wilde to remain an ‗uncatchable‘ enigma. Similar to his own antagonist, Lord Darlington, Wilde seems to comprehend that ‗to be intelligible is to be found out‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 425). Therefore, Wilde‘s posing can be interpreted as a defensive attitude to maintain his artistic, critical and personal integrity.

A. B. Walkley was another critic who focused on the flow of the dialogue. In a signed review for the *Speaker* (27 February 1892), he countered all the negative elements he himself pointed out in the play by saying that, ‗I know all that; but the great thing is, that the play never bores me; and when a dramatist gives me such a perpetual flow of brilliant talk as Mr. Wilde gives, I am willing to forgive him all the sins in the dramatic Decalogue, and the rest‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 123). Walkley was one of the few critics who could perceive the exact characteristics which would make Wilde‘s works enduring.

Oscar Wilde‘s first comedy is able to amuse both (some) critics and audience, for it has an appealing refined humour, which would become Wilde‘s trademark. *Lady Windermere’s Fan* marks a turning point in Wilde‘s career as a playwright, for it is his first successful dramatic work. Wilde‘s humour helped him to establish his name as a commercial success, whereas it has also made him hard to pin down. Wilde‘s works are still considered a rich source of interpretative analyses due to his slipperiness and elusiveness.

4.3 *A Woman of No Importance*

A Woman of No Importance is the second comedy and fifth play by Oscar Wilde. The play premiered on 19 April 1893 at London‘s Haymarket Theatre. It was written at the request of the theatre‘s actor-manager, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, following the success of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* at the St. James Theatre.

The premiere was a great success and the Prince of Wales is said to have attended the second performance and told Wilde not to alter a single line (ELLMAN, 1988, p. 384). The play was also performed in New York and was due to go on tour in the United States when Wilde was arrested and charged with indecency and sodomy. The tour was cancelled.

Like many of Wilde‘s plays, the main theme is the secrets of the upper-classes. Lord Illingworth discovers that the young man he has employed as a secretary is in fact his illegitimate son, a situation similar to the central plot of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

Obviously in *A Woman of No Importance* there are slight changes in the story, for Lord Illingworth only discovers his parentage to Gerald Arbuthnot in the second act. The audience discovers the secret of Gerald Arbuthnot‘s parents along with Lord Illingworth. Then, they are told through the dialogue between Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot that once they had a relationship which resulted in her pregnancy. As Lord Illingworth refused to marry her, she disappeared with the baby without accepting the money Lord Illingworth‘s mother offered her. Mrs Arbuthnot adopted a new surname and raised her child, Gerald, as if she was a widow. Nonetheless, by an accident, they meet after twenty years in Lady Hunstanton‘s country house. Lady Hunstanton is a secondary character, who is entertaining some guests, including an American girl named Hester Worsley, who quickly becomes Gerald‘s subject of interest.

When Mrs Arbuthnot discovers that the man who offered her son a job is Lord Illingworth, she refuses to allow Gerald to go abroad with him. Gerald, in his turn, unaware of the fact that he is Lord Illingworth‘s son, is willing to take the position he was offered. Mrs Arbuthnot fears she will lose her son to Lord Illingworth if she allows Gerald to go with his father. In fact, she has not forgiven Lord Illingworth for abandoning her in the past and does not want to admit Lord Illingworth‘s presence either in her or in Gerald‘s life. As Gerald does not understand her refusal, Mrs Arbuthnot feels obliged to confess her past to her son. Initially, Gerald judges her acts, but he is soon convinced that he should pardon her. After a quarrel between Gerald and Lord Illingworth, involving Hester Worsley, Gerald concludes that his father is untrustworthy and forgives his mother. At the end, along with Hester, Gerald and Mrs Arbuthnot plan to go to the United States, where Gerald and Hester will get married.

One of the most criticised points of *A Woman of No Importance* at the time of its première is the fact that Mrs Arbuthnot overreacts to her meeting with Lord Illingworth after so many years. Her motivation seems weak, and she sounds melodramatic mainly because she has fed her sorrow for such a long time. Although twenty years have passed since she got pregnant and was abandoned by Lord Illingworth, Mrs Arbuthnot is still very resentful of everything that has happened to her:

> MRS ARBUTHNOT: I left you because you refused to give the child a name. Before my son was born, I implored you to marry me.

> LORD ILLINGWORTH: I had no expectations then. And besides, Rachel, I wasn‘t much older than you were. I was only twenty-two. I was twenty-one, I believe, when the whole thing began in your father‘s garden.
> MRS ARBUTHNOT: When a man is old enough to do wrong he should be old enough to do right also (WILDE, 2003, p. 489).

She is ready to excuse herself for being so naïve and lax as to have got pregnant before marriage, but she is not able to forgive him for being disingenuous enough not to assume his own child. As strict as she has become after suffering the consequences of having a baby out of wedlock, Mrs Arbuthnot has raised her son, Gerald, to be rigorous too. Lord Illingworth wisely points out to Mrs Arbuthnot that Gerald is going to judge his mother‘s attitude, as soon as he knows the truth about the events surrounding his birth. Lord Illingworth warns Mrs Arbuthnot by saying: ‗Don‘t be deceived, Rachel. Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 490).

Lord Illingworth‘s words sound like a prophecy, for Gerald really does judge his mother after she confesses her past to him. Gerald‘s attitude towards Lord Illingworth when he discovers his father has tried to kiss Hester makes it clear that Gerald acts based on a very strict moral code; hence, he is the perfect match for Hester.

In fact, even when he discovers that Lord Illingworth is his father he does not soften his attitude and does not forgive him, neither for his behaviour with his mother nor with Hester. Nevertheless, Gerald feels that the right thing Lord Illingworth should do is to get married to his mother in order to make up for all the trouble she had suffered when he refused to marry her twenty years before. It seems that Gerald does not understand what his mother has suffered and the hatred she keeps in her heart. Nonetheless, as Hester Worsley interferes and intercedes in Mrs Arbuthnot‘s favour, Gerald forgives his mother and desists from the idea of a marriage between his parents.

Although having a child out of wedlock has already been a sacrifice, Mrs Arbuthnot feels that being Gerald‘s mother pays the price of her wrong attitudes in the past. Her love for Gerald is so great that she feels that she cannot repent of her past. She even asserts that her dishonour has made her love him even more. Even though Mrs Arbuthnot is a moralist, she is still proud of having Gerald as her son, despite the fact that he is illegitimate. Mrs Arbuthnot‘s love for Gerald is as great as her hate for Lord Illingworth. Even though Mrs Arbuthnot knows that society would accept her if she got married to Lord Illingworth, she despises him so much that she cannot accept such a

situation and she does not want to get married only in order to become respectable. Mrs Arbuthnot‘s disgust for Lord Illingworth is even stronger than her moral sense.

At the end of the play, when Mrs Arbuthnot is unexpectedly visited by Lord Illingworth, he notices that she has become a harsh woman. Nonetheless, when she dismisses him and tells him that they are never to meet again, Lord Illingworth offends her and is even ready to insult his son, but he is interrupted by Mrs Arbuthnot:

> LORD ILLINGWORTH: How curious! At this moment you look exactly as you looked the night you left me twenty years ago. You have just the same expression in your mouth. Upon my word, Rachel, no woman ever loved me as you did. Why, you gave yourself to me like a flower, to do anything I liked with. You were the prettiest of playthings, the most fascinating of small romances … [*Pulls out watch*.] Quarter to two! Must be strolling back to Hunstanton. Don‘t suppose I shall see you there again. I‘m sorry, I am, really. It‘s been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one‘s own rank, and treated quite seriously too, one‘s mistress, and one‘s –
> [*MRS ARBUTHNOT snatches up glove and strikes LORD ILLINGWORTH across the face with it. LORD ILLINGWORTH starts. He is dazed by the insult of his punishment. Then he controls himself, and goes to window and looks out at his son. Sighs and leaves the room*] (WILDE, 2003, p. 513-14).

The interrupted sentence does not allow the public to confirm whether Lord Illingworth would have used the word _ba*s*tard‘ or not. The fact is that Lord Illingworth had his ego hurt when Mrs Arbuthnot clearly and calmly demonstrated that neither Gerald nor she herself needs him any more. As Gerald is in love with Hester, who is a rich girl, they will not accept Lord Illingworth‘s offer of money. In fact, Lord Illingworth has come to Mrs Arbuthnot‘s house precisely to tell her that the English laws do not allow him to legitimise Gerald, but he is ready to leave his son three of his properties. It is an offer that Lord Illingworth conceitedly thought was very generous of him. As he perceives he is despised and his money is treated as worthless, Lord Illingworth grows indignant and he wants to show he is superior to Mrs Arbuthnot and even to his son, Gerald. In order to show his superiority without disclosing how affected he is by Mrs Arbuthnot and Gerald‘s contempt, Lord Illingworth uses his position in society to demonstrate that he will never be considered as low ranked as his former mistress and his illegitimate son. Although Lord Illingworth spends the play mocking Victorian values and morals, at the end of the play he uses these same principles to support his position, while still scorning the fact that, due to Victorian double standards, he dishonoured Mrs Arbuthnot and her son, but he is considered respectable.

Lord Illingworth‘s final lines are capable of humiliating Mrs Arbuthnot to the core, and as soon as he leaves, Wilde‘s stage directions indicate that she falls sobbing on the sofa‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 514). Nonetheless, when Gerald and Hester come in from the garden and Gerald finds Lord Illingworth‘s glove lying on the floor, he questions Mrs Arbuthnot who had visited her, to which she answers: Oh! no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 514). If Mrs Arbuthnot were to admit she has felt humiliated by Lord Illingworth‘s words, she would be confessing that he is still capable of affecting her. Mrs Arbuthnot is proud, and she does not want to surrender to Lord Illingworth‘s ability of defeating her. Her words also echo Lord Illingworth‘s own, when he comes across her letter on Lady Hunstanton‘s table at the end of the first act:

> LORD ILLINGWORTH [*Sees MRS ARBUTHNOT’S letter on table, and takes it up and looks at envelope*.]: What a curious handwriting! It reminds me of the handwriting of a woman I used to know years ago.
> MRS ALLONBY: Who?
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: Oh! no one. No one in particular. A woman of no importance (WILDE, 2003, p. 477).

Even though Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot‘s words are the same, they do not hold equal meaning. Lord Illingworth really intends to say that Mrs Arbuthnot‘s memory means nothing to him, that is, he is indifferent to her, as he was in the past. Mrs Arbuthnot, on the other hand, still hates him, as if twenty years were not enough to erase how much she has suffered because of his attitudes. Therefore, when she tells Gerald that the glove belongs to a man of no importance, Mrs Arbuthnot is trying to belittle the weight of her feelings in relation to him.

Despite Mrs Arbuthnot‘s resentment towards him, Lord Illingworth does not seem to have any remorse about his past and he could not be less concerned about the shame he caused to Mrs Arbuthnot when he refused to marry her:

> MRS ARBUTHNOT: Do you think I would allow my son –
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: *Our* son.
> MRS ARBUTHNOT: My son [*LORD ILLINGWORTH shrugs his shoulders*] – to go away with the man who spoiled my youth, who ruined my life, who has tainted every moment of my days? You don‘t realise what my past has been in suffering and in shame.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: My dear Rachel, I must candidly say that I think Gerald‘s future considerably more important than your past.
> MRS ARBUTHNOT: Gerald cannot separate his future from my past (WILDE, 2003, p. 490).

Whereas Mrs Arbuthnot overreacts in relation to her suffering, Lord Illingworth lacks emotion. He is so objective that he cannot see a purpose in being entrapped in the past

as Mrs Arbuthnot is. Lord Illingworth knows the past cannot be changed. Moreover, he is aware that the future is yet to be built, which leads him to say he cares much more about his son‘s future than his ex-girlfriend‘s past. Even if he reacts based on reason, it is noticeable that Lord Illingworth has some level of considerateness regarding Gerald. Lord Illingworth is concerned about his son‘s future, for he wishes to provide what is best for Gerald. He even agrees to get married to Mrs Arbuthnot in order to legitimate his son:

> LORD ILLINGWORTH: I don‘t admit for a moment that the boy is right in what he says. I don‘t admit that it is any duty of mine to marry you. I deny it entirely. But to get my son back I am ready – yes, I am ready to marry you, Rachel – and to treat you always with the deference and respect due to my wife. I will marry you as soon as you choose. I give you my word of honour (WILDE, 2003, p. 512).

In fact, even when Lord Illingworth discovers that Gerald wants him to get married to Mrs Arbuthnot, he denies it is his duty to do so. Lord Illingworth denies his duties in relation to Mrs Arbuthnot, but he does not deny them regarding Gerald. Lord Illingworth wants to be an honourable father to Gerald Arbuthnot, and he compromises himself in order to do so.

The change in Lord Illingworth‘s characterisation has also been heavily criticised. As the only dandy of the play, he is featured as a wicked and immoral character, and his concern for his son‘s opinion about him may seem quite amiss. When Lord Illingworth urges Mrs Arbuthnot to marry him in order to get Gerald‘s respect back, it sounds as if Wilde‘s philistine self supposedly begs pardon from society for his excesses. [...] Meanwhile, his dandiacal self continues to defy that society and to proclaim absolute freedom so that he can express his own personal tastes and values‘ (JUAN JR., 1985, p. 47). As San Juan Jr. claims, Wilde seems to be trying to please his Victorian audience. Nevertheless, soon Wilde puts Lord Illingworth back on track, for Lord Illingworth harasses Miss Hester Worsley and disrespects his son Gerald due to his wish to prove that even the Puritan girl cannot resist to his charm. By disrespecting the very son he would like to honour, Lord Illingworth‘s attitude may be seen as an attempt to defy society‘s values. He not only shows that he is an immoral character, but also that he feels free to do whatever pleases him, regardless of social conventions.

As a dandy, Lord Illingworth is truly wicked, and he is given to making ironic and witty speeches, which contribute to the comic quality of the play:

> LADY HUNSTANTON: […] I think on the whole that the secret of life is to take things very, very easily.

> MRS ALLONBY: The secret of life is never to have an emotion that is unbecoming.
> LADY STUTFIELD: The secret of life is to appreciate the pleasure of being terribly, terribly deceived.
> KELVIL: The secret of life is to resist temptation, Lady Stutfield.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: There is no secret of life. Life‘s aim, if it has one, is simply to be always looking for temptations. There are not nearly enough. I sometimes pass a whole day without coming across a single one. It is quite dreadful. It makes one so nervous about the future (WILDE, 2003, p. 497).

Lord Illingworth‘s concern for the future is completely different from conventional worry, for his apprehension is related to the quantity of temptation, which was not made to be resisted. Therefore, Lord Illingworth‘s remarks must always be seen in the context of his wickedness. After all, this is his main characteristic.

Due to Lord Illingworth‘s dandiacal remarks the play does not evolve to be a solemn dramatic work. Lord Illingworth is one of the characters responsible for the audience‘s amusement in *A Woman of No Importance*. His witty comments add lightness to the comedy and shift the focus of attention to trivialities rather than seriousness. However, most of the unimportant subjects mentioned in the dialogues between the characters present degrees of criticism. Wilde mastered the manipulation of irony so minutely that the characters‘ witty comments come with a cover of frivolity and playfulness, so as to deceive the audience in recognising the difference between the serious and the mockery.

Lord Illingworth is not the only character who stands for his sharpness among the circles of casual conversation. Actually, the background is a weekend spent by high society in Lady Hunstanton‘s country house. Lady Hunstanton receives many guests, who are depicted talking and expressing their opinion on several subjects. Lady Hunstanton‘s guests can be regarded as Wilde‘s means of portraying society‘s manners and mores.

Among the characters who represent Victorian high society, there are some who stand out for their speech and attitudes, like Mrs Allonby, Lady Hunstanton and Lady Caroline Pontefract. Lady Hunstanton, the owner of the house, brings to the play a humorous tone, as she is always making baffling statements and puzzling observations: _Besides, Lord Illingworth may marry any day. I was in hopes he would have married Lady Kelso. But I believe he said her family was too large. Or was it her feet? I forget which‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 467). Lady Hunstanton‘s lack of memory produces a quite hilarious effect, for her confusion between two such disparate elements makes her

statement absurd and bizarre. Such a comical device would not be seen as a character‘s trait if it was used only once. That is the reason why Wilde gives Lady Hunstanton‘s speech more instances of the kind: ‗I remember the occurrence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy, or gout. I forget which‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 468); and ‗And there was also, I remember, a clergyman who wanted to be a lunatic, or a lunatic who wanted to be a clergyman, I forget which, but I know the Court of Chancery investigated the matter, and decided that he was quite sane‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 485). Lady Hunstanton‘s speech is so odd that it contributes largely to the comicality of the play. Her speech adds lightness to the play, which, despite all its exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts, cannot be considered a melodrama.

Mrs Allonby, in her turn, is Lord Illingworth‘s perfect match, for she is witty and wicked like a dandy. Mrs Allonby‘s speech sounds epigrammatic, as she keeps uttering perfectly phrased statements, such as that ‗plain women are always jealous of their husbands, beautiful women never are!‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 474). Like Lord Illingworth, Mrs Allonby is quite self-conceited, and she scorns morality. She even tells Lady Stutfield that she lost her interest in her husband because she discovered that he was being sincere when he told her he had never loved someone else before her:

> LADY HUNSTANTON: My dear child, you don‘t mean to tell me that you won‘t forgive your husband because he never loved any one else? Did you ever hear such a thing, Caroline? I am quite surprised.
> LADY CAROLINE: Oh, women have become so highly educated, Jane, that nothing should surprise us nowadays, except happy marriages. They apparently are getting remarkably rare.
> MRS ALLONBY: Oh, they‘re quite out of date (WILDE, 2003, p. 480).

As Mrs Allonby blames Mr Allonby‘s inexperience and naivety for her disinterest on him, she disdains sincerity, one of the principles valued by Victorian Society. Mrs Allonby‘s wit and wickedness allow her to be seen as Lord Illingworth‘s feminine counterpart.

Lady Caroline Pontefract also stands out among high society characters for she has a hypocritical attitude which deepens the satirical tone of the play. Lady Caroline masks herself with a cover of morality, but she is as wicked as Mrs Allonby. Sometimes she confronts Mrs Allonby, and poses as if she had a superior moral standard, but when she is faced with Miss Hester Worsley, who is a true Puritan, she reveals her morality is not so high:

> LADY CAROLINE [...]: Mrs Allonby is hardly a very suitable person.
> HESTER: I dislike Mrs Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say.
> LADY CAROLINE: I am not sure, Miss Worsley, that foreigners like yourself should cultivate likes or dislikes about the people they are invited to meet. Mrs Allonby is very well born. She is a niece of Lord Brancaster‘s. It is said, of course, that she ran away twice before she was married. But you know how unfair people often are. I myself don‘t believe she ran away more than once (WILDE, 2003, p. 465-66).

In this extract, Lady Caroline mentions that Mrs Allonby is not a suitable person to be invited to a country house. However, as soon as Hester makes a comment with which she disagrees, Lady Caroline starts defending Mrs Allonby. When Lady Caroline claims to believe that Mrs Allonby has not run away more than once, she sounds as if she would consider Mrs Allonby suitable enough to attend Lady Hunstanton‘s select party. Therefore, Lady Caroline‘s principles are not as high as might be expected. Indeed, according to Mrs Allonby, Lady Caroline has already been married four times, which already denounces that she is not a respectable Victorian lady.

Lady Caroline opposes Miss Hester Worsley more than once. In the second act, as Miss Hester is delivering a very passionate speech on how men should pay the same as women for sinning, Lady Caroline interrupts her to ask for such a trivial thing as her cotton. By interrupting Hester, Lady Caroline is able to break the tension that Hester‘s speech had aroused, while revealing her disinterest in Hester‘s morals. Lady Caroline‘s hypocritical speech is used in order to denounce Victorian Society.

In such an immoral context, Hester Worsley stands out for not fitting into any group. As Hester has not met anyone in high society who shares her strict views, Lady Hunstanton introduces her to Mrs Arbuthnot, saying that Mrs Arbuthnot ‗is one of the good, sweet, simple people you told us we never admitted into society‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 484). The audience cannot perceive Wilde‘s irony in such a scene, for Mrs Arbuthnot‘s past has not been revealed yet. Nonetheless, as soon as Mrs Arbuthnot‘s story comes to the fore, Lady Hunstanton‘s words echoes Wilde‘s acid portrayal of English society, for the only woman who is expected to have a high moral standard is the one whose past, if revealed, would make her an outcast.

Unaware of Mrs Arbuthnot‘s past, Hester expresses her strict view on morality. Hester‘s speech is characterised by its high moral tone and passionate intonation, and she affirms to Mrs Arbuthnot that she believes that both men and women should be punished in the same way for their sins. She also adds that children would also carry the

burden of their parents‘ mistakes. Nonetheless, when Hester is with Mrs Arbuthnot, she is calm and candid and she is able to behave kindly. As soon as Hester discovers that Mrs Arbuthnot was a victim of Lord Illingworth‘s charm – and being herself a victim of his harassment –, she changes her mind and states that the sins of parents should not be visited on their children, for God‘s law is only love.

As Hester is in love with Gerald Arbuthnot, it is possible to see that love has made her heart more kind and sympathetic. Therefore, Hester becomes blander in her harsh moralistic tone towards the mother of his loved one. However, her kindness does not extend towards Lord Illingworth, and even after forgiving Mrs Arbuthnot‘s wrongs, Hester is incapable of forgiving Lord Illingworth, and she still despises his attitudes.

Hester proves to be the ideal match for Gerald, who, in his turn, at the end of the play keeps a similar position to hers. In the course of the play, Gerald has been taught that social conventions and moral standards can neither be applied to every circumstance, nor should be followed regardless of feelings. The solution Gerald presents for his parents‘ situation, that is, that they should get married to amend their past mistakes, can soil his mother even further. Mrs Arbuthnot has stiffened her morals since she got pregnant, whereas Lord Illingworth has not changed at all. Even if Lord Illingworth agrees to get married to her, he clearly affirms he can do it to please his son, for he has no obligations towards Mrs Arbuthnot. Therefore, uniting them in marriage would make them unequally yoked.

Through Gerald‘s change of perspective as well as Hester‘s points of view, Wilde is denouncing the double standards of Victorian society, and showing that, whereas English high society claims to keep strict behaviour, the truth is that the moralising laws are only to be obeyed by women. As Wilde points out, a society in which morality does not apply to men is a society with no morality at all, for morality presupposes a virtuous conduct that Lord Illingworth – and the immoral kind of man he represents – is far from following. A society that alleges it is high-principled and accepts such an immoral person as Lord Illingworth among its peers is not acting in accordance with morality and showing recognition of right and wrong.

Wilde‘s remarks on the problem of Victorian hypocrisy are accompanied by amusing comments made by the immoral characters, such as Lord Illingworth and Mrs Allonby. Wilde opposes serious and trivial characters in such a way that the serious are always depicted as the ones who dully hold high principles, whereas the trivial coincide with the comical immoral ones. Hence, the wicked characters normally overshadow the

righteous ones. Wilde‘s portrayal of high society is decidedly ironic, for Wilde constantly laughs at Victorian solemnity. It is as if Wilde were trying to say that, whenever English society tries to maintain appearances, it evolves into dullness, for its preoccupation with the manifestation of manners and morals is superficial. The immoral characters, on the other hand, are the ones who smartly perceive that one cannot live according to double standards without being found out. Therefore, wickedness becomes their only way of living – they are not hypocrites –, and they scorn society because they have already noticed that its principles remain on the surface.

Critical Reviews

A Woman of No Importance has been described as ‗the weakest of the plays Wilde wrote in the Nineties‘ (ELLMAN, 1988, p. 357). Many critics have noted that much of the first act and half of the second surround the witty conversations of members of the upper-classes, the drama only beginning in the second half of the second act, with Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot finding their pasts catching up with them. Nevertheless, Wilde himself considered the first act the most perfect one, precisely because it contained ‗absolutely no action at all‘ (qtd in RABY, 1988, p. 93). Despite the author‘s own opinion, the play was not a huge popular success, unlike his subsequent comedies.

Indeed, critics were not so generous with Wilde as they were regarding *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. William Butler Yeats was one of the critics who disapproved of the play. In a review reprinted in Karl Beckson‘s book, Yeats argues that *A Woman of No Importance*, ‗despite its qualities, [...] is not a work of art, it has no central fire, it is not dramatic in any ancient sense of the word. The reason is that the tragic and emotional people, the people who are important to the story, Mrs Arbuthnot, Gerald Arbuthnot, and Hester Worsley, are conventions of the stage‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 163). Yeats is right in considering that the three characters that end the play together are conventions of the stage. Mrs Arbuthnot is the infamous woman with a past, common to almost all of Wilde‘s plays, and also traditionally depicted as a typical character of the comedy of manners. Hester Worsley is the Puritan girl and Gerald Arbuthnot is the naïve kind of boy, and both turn out to represent ideal beliefs of Victorian society. Yeats claims that Wilde is not able to work creatively out of convention, and his devices and techniques are seen as unoriginal. However, the fact that Yeats ignores the antagonists

Lord Illingworth and Mrs Allonby reveals that the renowned critic did not fully understand Wilde‘s purpose.

Regardless of the fact that most critics agreed with Yeats, William Archer supported Wilde‘s work and emphasised, in a review for the *World*, published on 26 April 1893, that

> it is not his wit [...] and still less his knack of paradox-twisting, that makes me claim for him a place apart among living English dramatists. It is the keenness of his intellect, the individuality of his point of view, the excellence of his verbal style, and, above all, the genuinely dramatic quality of his inspirations (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 145).

Although Archer held the opinion that Wilde‘s work excelled in quality, he was not condescending in relation to the faults he observed in the play, and even though he manifested it in his article, some critics considered his review to be too eulogistic. Hence, he defended his right to praise Wilde in another review published on 3 June 1893.

Nonetheless, Archer was almost alone in Wilde‘s defence, for most critics agreed that the characters in *A Woman of No Importance* were far from interesting, and the plot was considered flat and tedious. Due to its unpopularity, the play is not as frequently revived as Wilde‘s successful comedies, such as *An Ideal Husband* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

4.4 *An Ideal Husband*

An Ideal Husband is Oscar Wilde‘s penultimate play, which opened on 3 January, 1895. It ran for 124 performances and closed about 20 days after Wilde‘s arrest. It was an absolute success from its first performance and, after *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is Wilde‘s most frequently produced play. The play was published in 1899, although Wilde was not identified as the author. This published version differs slightly from the performed play, for Wilde added many passages and cut others. Prominent additions included written stage directions and character descriptions, which demonstrates Wilde‘s concern to have his play performed as he intended. Wilde‘s wish to take control over the performance of his final play suggests that he knew precisely how the play should be developed in order to express what he meant. Wilde‘s added text also indicates that he was a leader in the effort to make plays accessible to the

reading public, for his character descriptions and stage directions are aimed at clarifying his purposes, so that readers of the play are able to understand his points.

Although Wilde did not leave plenty of stage directions in most of his plays, *An Ideal Husband* is an exception, for it is the only play in which Wilde gives us long descriptions of each character, such as the following:

> [*MABEL CHILTERN is a perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type. She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower. There is ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair, and the little mouth, with its parted lips, is expectant, like the mouth of a child. She has the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence. To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so*] (WILDE, 2003, p. 516).

Wilde not only describes Miss Mabel‘s personality, but also her physical appearance. It is as if he was not working on a play – which would be performed by an actor whose appearance might well not correspond to that intended by the author. From Wilde‘s stage directions, it is possible to see how he conceives each character in this comedy, not only in terms of physical appearance – as in the extract above – but also in psychological terms, as the following extract shows:

> [*Enter LORD GORING. Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage*] (WILDE, 2003, p. 521).

Unlike Mabel Chiltern, who is physically described, Lord Goring is depicted in relation to his manners and mood. He is clearly distinguished by his conceitedness, and yet he has a trait of modesty. From the outset, Lord Goring is characterised as a dandy, but he is rather an unconventional one, for he is the first dandy character Wilde showed to be good. The second description of Lord Goring, though, is more revealing, for it announces:

> [*Enter LORD GORING in evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought*] (WILDE, 2003, p. 553).

In this description, Lord Goring is seen as the dandy philosopher; his clothes are associated with the superiority of his state of mind, that is, his refined aesthetic sense is

also shown through his choice of clothing. The stage directions show much about Wilde‘s intentions in relation to the characters of the play as well as the way the director is supposed to guide the actors who play Mabel Chiltern‘s and Lord Goring‘s roles.

The action of *An Ideal Husband* is set in London in Wilde‘s contemporary years and it takes place over the course of twenty-four hours. The plot revolves around blackmail and political corruption and touches the themes of public and private honour. In the play, Wilde states, through Mrs Cheveley‘s voice, that: _Sooner or later, we shall all have to pay for what we do‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 528). But he also adds through Sir Robert Chiltern‘s line that, _No one should be entirely judged by their past‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 532).

The story revolves around a sordid past secret, which makes it similar to Wilde‘s previous comedies, except for the fact that in *An Ideal Husband* the character who has the secret is a man, instead of a woman. Sir Robert Chiltern, the man with a past, is a politician whose fortune and career were constructed on the selling of a cabinet secret to a stock exchange speculator. Sir Robert committed this fraud when he was young and, after his initial error, he never backslid again. Sir Robert got married to a woman who sees in him an ideal husband. Lady Gertrude Chiltern is a righteous character who never makes any concession to illicit acts. She does not know about the secret her husband holds; hence, she has a great admiration for him. The Chilterns live quite peacefully until the moment when Mrs Cheveley arrives to threaten their happiness. Mrs Cheveley has a compromising letter in which Sir Robert Chiltern‘s sordid secret is revealed. Wishing to establish an alliance with Sir Robert Chiltern in order to be benefited by a fraudulent scheme, Mrs Cheveley blackmails the ideal husband, warning him to give her support in the Parliament in exchange for the letter. Dissatisfied with the course of events, Mrs Cheveley exposes Sir Robert‘s past to his wife, ruining the ideal image Lady Gertrude has of him. The conflicts come to an end when Lord Goring, Sir Robert Chiltern‘s friend, interferes to obtain the compromising letter from Mrs Cheveley. Besides saving Sir Robert‘s reputation, Lord Goring also plays a key role as an intercessor in the Chilterns‘ marriage. Lord Goring is responsible for convincing Lady Gertrude to forgive her husband‘s fault. At the end, Sir Robert‘s career is safe and he is offered a seat in the Prime Minister‘s cabinet.

The title of the play refers to Sir Robert Chiltern, the protagonist, who is regarded by his wife as the perfect man. In Lady Gertrude Chiltern‘s opinion, her husband is incapable of committing any kind of immoral act, and she seems to love him

only for the perfection she sees in his character. Sir Robert‘s irreproachable career and manners have contributed to Lady Gertrude Chiltern‘s point of view, and she worships him because he seems flawless. However, in the course of the play Sir Robert‘s past is revealed, and his wife discovers that the ideal husband was in fact a creation of her imagination, for her husband‘s character does not correspond to her idealised conception.

Actually, Sir Robert Chiltern has made some mistakes in the past, which enabled him to start a new life as a rich man, but since then he has had admirable moral behaviour and impeccable conduct. Despite his past, he can be considered an honest man. However, he shows he is far from being a perfect man when he affirms he has no regret for what he has done, since his sordid actions have given him many opportunities he would otherwise have been denied. Even so, he fears that his wife may discover his faults and, consequently, stop loving him. Sir Robert loves her so much that he does not want her to find out that he has _feet of clay‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 552). Therefore, Sir Robert tries to prevent his wife from discovering his past faults, but he is not able to prevent Mrs Cheveley from revealing his history to Lady Gertrude.

As Sir Robert has been ethical in his personal and professional career since his slip, he is considered one of the few honest politicians left in the House of Lords. Therefore, after Mrs Cheveley makes her primary attempt to blackmail him, Sir Robert Chiltern reacts as it is expected from an honoured gentleman. He not only denies her the opportunity to keep talking, but also invites her to leave his house, as if she did not deserve to be in the same room with him: _If you will allow me, I will call your carriage for you. You have lived so long abroad, Mrs Cheveley, that you seem to be unable to realise that you are talking to an English gentleman‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 527). Nonetheless, when Mrs Cheveley shows she knows his sordid past secrets, Sir Robert Chiltern steps back and starts considering her offer. Although Mrs Cheveley has Sir Robert in her hands, he does not bend to her in terms of his treatment. He continues to treat her as discourteously as he did on the occasion of her first attempt to blackmail him.

When questioned about the veracity of Mrs Cheveley‘s information, Sir Robert cannot deny it to his friend Lord Goring. Nonetheless, Sir Robert does not consider that he had sold himself. Instead, he claims he has bought success for an expensive price, which reveals that Sir Robert Chiltern does not regret his past actions. In fact, he has reworked the facts in his mind in such a way as to tell himself a version of the story

which convinces him that he is not a common thief – as Lady Gertrude accuses him of being. Indeed, he rearranges information in order to keep his peace of mind.

As Sir Robert Chiltern only committed a single crime and straightened his conduct after this lapse, he cannot be compared to Mrs Cheveley. They do not have the same level of morals. Sir Robert is not so high principled as his wife wishes him to be, though, and the ideal husband shows he has a character flaw.

The only flawless character in the play happens to be Lady Gertrude Chiltern. She could be considered the ideal wife, for she has an upright character, which is based on well-founded principles. Lady Gertrude Chiltern‘s wish to have a spotless image is not a superficial pose. She indeed wants the image she conveys to society to be correspondent to reality. Lady Gertrude may be seen as a representative of the moralistic Victorian society, with all its strict behavioural codes. She is upright, rigorous and has a very deep interest in social causes and philanthropy, which makes her an ethical model. She loves her husband, Sir Robert Chiltern, precisely because she thinks they are equally honest.

However, when she discovers his secret past, she is unable to forgive him. She will not accept the fact that he does not fit the pedestal she has built for him. Nonetheless, over the course of the play, she undergoes a drastic change and accepts that she loves Sir Robert Chiltern despite everything he has done. Thus, she forgives him and accepts that, even though he was dishonest once, his whole life cannot be judged by one single act of folly. At the end of the play, she is more mature, since she admits there is no perfection when it comes to human beings.

Lady Gertrude worships Sir Robert because of the high qualities she attributes to him. Nevertheless, she is not able to cope with reality. She prefers the idealistic world she has created around Sir Robert Chiltern and she really overreacts to it in face of the events. In fact, her reaction is congruent to her principles, although they seem unrealistic:

> LADY CHILTERN: Don‘t come near me. Don‘t touch me. I feel as if you had soiled me for ever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible painted mask! You sold yourself for money. Oh! a common thief were better. You put yourself up to sale to the highest bidder! You were bought in the market. You lied to the whole world. And yet you will not lie to me (WILDE, 2003, p. 552).

In the course of the play, however, Lady Chiltern is convinced by Lord Goring that she should accept her husband‘s failures. Lord Goring plays a fundamental role in Lady

Gertrude‘s change, for he helps her to discern her priorities in life. As Lord Goring discovers Sir Robert‘s secret prior to Lady Gertrude, he offers his help to her in case she needs it. Lord Goring‘s attitude is similar to that of Lord Darlington in the first act of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, except that Lord Goring does not have a shady intention behind his offer as Lord Darlington does.

Through Lord Goring‘s interference, Lady Gertrude Chiltern realises she is able to continue to love her husband, faults and all, if she gives her principles up. Thus, she abandons her idealistic values and starts dealing with reality. In the end, Lord Goring makes Lady Gertrude realise that forgiving her husband includes supporting him to continue his political career. Lord Goring tells Lady Gertrude that leaving the politics would be a great sacrifice for Sir Robert. Therefore, Lady Gertrude completely gives her principles up in order to support her husband. As realistic as Lady Gertrude‘s choice may seem, the fact that she has to abandon her morals in order to sustain her marriage is rather ironic. Lady Gertrude is divided between two of her principles: one of them is her morality and the other one her marriage. Although she has always thought that her moral principles sustained her marriage, she discovers that she is able to keep her marriage without her morality. Lady Gertrude has to make a choice between two pillars that support Victorian society. The fact that she is forced to choose reveals Wilde‘s view that it is impossible to keep Victorian morality while claiming to be happily married. Therefore, the game between the real and the ideal is set by Wilde as a way of criticising Victorian morals and manners, for moral perfection cannot exist in reality. Moreover, Wilde is saying that morality cannot coincide with happiness in married life.

Although there is a new game between ideal and real in *An Ideal Husband*, the game between trivial and serious still occurs, especially in the figure of Lord Goring. Even if he seems quite serious in the way he advises Lady Gertrude, Lord Goring plays Wilde‘s game between triviality and seriousness, for most of the time he adopts an inconsequential pose in relation to life. After all, Lord Goring is the dandy of *An Ideal Husband*. He is even described as ‗the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 553) and he is worried about appearances. He is afraid of not being misunderstood and he keeps uttering paradoxes: witticisms are his favourite mode of speech. Although in the past he was engaged to Mrs Cheveley, he has no feelings for her and at the end of the play he proposes to Miss Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert‘s sister, in ‗a flash of genius‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 573), as he himself describes it. Even if he is a dandy, Lord Goring is not completely amoral and he reproaches Sir

Robert for his dishonest past and loathes Mrs Cheveley for exposing Sir Robert to Lady Gertrude. Nonetheless, at the end he is not as severe as Lady Gertrude, and he is the one who advises her to forgive Sir Robert.

Lord Goring is the first dandy in Wilde‘s plays to present a good character. He is neither the antagonist, like Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, nor the villain, like Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*. Lord Goring is also not cruel as Prince Paul in *Vera*, nor Simone Gesso in *The Duchess of Padua*. He may be regarded as Wilde‘s first attempt to combine a truthful character with a trivial personality. Because of this unusual arrangement in his characterisation, Lord Goring may be seen as the most unconventional character in Wilde‘s plays up to that point.

Lord Goring‘s originality is reflected in his speech. When it comes to expressing himself, he reveals that he is extremely proud and vain. As Lord Goring keeps uttering absurdities and nonsense, his father, Lord Caversham, asks if he truly comprehends what he declares, to which he answers: LORD GORING: Yes, father, if I listen attentively. / LORD CAVERSHAM: If you listen attentively!… Conceited young puppy!‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 556). Although he can be considered a witty dandy, he lacks the characteristic Wilde had attributed to the dandies in his previous plays, for he is neither wicked, nor immoral. In fact, Lord Goring is the first dandy who can also be considered a hero in Wilde‘s works.

As highly principled as Lord Goring is, he obviously reproaches Mrs Cheveley‘s conduct regarding the Chilterns:

> LORD GORING: Your transaction with Robert Chiltern may pass as a loathsome commercial transaction of a loathsome commercial age; but you seem to have forgotten that you came here to-night to talk of love, you whose lips desecrated the word love, you to whom the thing is a book closely sealed, went this afternoon to the house of one of the most noble and gentle women in the world to degrade her husband in her eyes, to try and kill her love for him, to put poison in her heart, and bitterness in her life, to break her idol, and, it may be, spoil her soul. That I cannot forgive you (WILDE, 2003, p. 565-6).

On the other hand, as he is ready to forgive his friend‘s fault, in spite of all his righteous manners, Lord Goring can be seen as a character who has morally flexible values. Nonetheless, he is one of the first characters to express disapproval to Sir Robert Chiltern for his past error. This apparently contradictory behaviour can be explained based precisely on the extract above: he reproaches Mrs Cheveley‘s actions because not only are they based on greed, but they also have the cruel intention to destroy the Chilterns‘ marriage. Lord Goring may understand human desire for money, but Mrs

Cheveley‘s attitudes are based on pure and simple hatred, which is something he cannot stand.

Mrs Cheveley‘s hate of Lady Gertrude Chiltern makes her the villain in *An Ideal Husband*, and she is introduced in the play by means of another character, Lady Markby, who brings her to the Chilterns‘ house. However, she already knows Lady Gertrude from their school days and she knows Sir Robert is the man who has power to influence the British government in relation to the Argentine canal scheme she is interested in. She has come to London expressly to meet Sir Robert, as she states that her stay depends _partly on the weather, partly on the cooking, and partly on Sir Robert‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 521). Thus, she has a clear plan involving Sir Robert to get what she wants and she will not give up until she has achieved her goal.

Mrs Cheveley always acts thinking of her own benefit, therefore she is very selfish and cruel. According to Lord Goring‘s description of her, she is _a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night!‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 522). From Lord Goring‘s words, Mrs Cheveley may be comprehended as someone capable of using her physical attributes to manipulate people. That is what Mrs Cheveley does, almost at the end of the play, when she proposes to marry Lord Goring, which at first appears to be a change in her conduct:

> MRS CHEVELEY: I am tired of living abroad. I want to come back to London. I want to have a charming house here. I want to have a salon. […] Besides, I have arrived at the romantic stage. When I saw you last night at the Chilterns‘, I knew you were the only person I had ever cared for, if I ever have cared for anybody, Arthur. And so, on the morning of the day you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern‘s letter. That is my offer (WILDE, 2003, p. 564).

She really seems to care about Lord Goring, but the fact is that she is proposing a one-sided relationship, that is, based on her own interests and benefit. Therefore, the only thing that has changed is her focus of interest, because she is still just as selfish and immoral as she has always been. In fact, since childhood, as far as Lady Gertrude can remember.

Throughout the play, Mrs Cheveley despises conventional values and good manners. She clearly opposes herself to Lady Gertrude, showing that the differences between them are irreconcilable:

> MRS CHEVELEY: I have a distinct recollection of Lady Chiltern always getting the good conduct prize!
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And what prizes did you get, Mrs Cheveley?

> MRS CHEVELEY: My prizes came a little later on in life. I don‘t think any of them were for good conduct (WILDE, 2003, p. 519).

Mrs Cheveley scorns Lady Gertrude‘s morals and behaviour. It is based on this rivalry that she goes to the Chilterns‘ house to expose Sir Robert in front of his wife: she wants Lady Gertrude to know that, despite her high principles, she has got married to a man who is as immoral as Mrs Cheveley is herself. In fact, she threatens to expose Sir Robert‘s past to the journalists if he does not support her in Parliament. Mrs Cheveley is so nasty that she is not satisfied with destroying Sir Robert Chiltern‘s image before his wife; she also wants to destroy his image before society.

Yet, all her plans are frustrated by Lord Goring‘s interference, mainly because she does not count on being discovered wearing a stolen jewel, which Lord Goring easily recognises as the bracelet he once gave to his cousin. The piece of jewellery was a wedding gift from Lord Goring to his cousin Mary Berkshire, and it had disappeared mysteriously ten years before, as Lord Goring tells the audience. Mrs Cheveley has her plans frustrated in the moment Lord Goring clasps the bracelet on her arm. As Mrs Cheveley does not know where the spring of the bracelet is, she is unable to unclasp it. Besieged by Lord Goring, who threatens to call the police, Mrs Cheveley is obliged to hand Lord Goring the letter that can incriminate Sir Robert.

Nonetheless, Mrs Cheveley is determined to harm the Chilterns, in one way or another. As soon as she sees Lady Gertrude‘s letter to Lord Goring, she deceives Lord Goring and steals Lady Gertrude‘s letter. Misinterpreting it as a love letter, Mrs Cheveley intends to send it to Sir Robert, so as to cause further intrigue between him and his wife. She is cunning and amoral until the end, and she hates Lady Gertrude so much that her determination to destroy her happiness does not seem to end.

At the end, Mrs Cheveley‘s goal is not achieved, mainly because the Chilterns have learned to respect each other‘s failures and their relationship has evolved to a more mature level. They have also learned how to talk about issues, and they are now comfortable about telling each other the truth. Lady Gertrude even clarifies to her husband the whole issue involving the letter she sent to Lord Goring, and her attitude frees Lord Goring to have a relationship with Miss Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert‘s sister.

Even though Miss Mabel Chiltern‘s role is a secondary one in the play, she is characterised as the perfect match for Lord Goring. She is in love with Lord Goring and does not feel ashamed to reveal her feelings. Although in Victorian society there was an unwritten rule for single ladies – all single ladies were supposed to be modest and

demure if they were to get engaged – Miss Mabel does not seem to care about society‘s rules. She is smart, perceptive and, even if she is not associated with women‘s projects, like Lady Gertrude, her behaviour suggests that she is willing to be more independent. Similar to Lord Goring, she is quite unconventional, since she is depicted as a girl ahead of her time. She is mature and guided by common sense, and may even be seen as the feminine counterpart of Lord Goring.

Although Wilde does not describe Miss Mabel Chiltern in the same terms as Lord Goring, she may still be regarded as the female dandy of *An Ideal Husband*, for she is clever, witty, and a little conceited. Her speech is filled with epigrams and paradoxes, and she sounds extremely sharp for a young lady. Her remarks, along with Lord Goring‘s, are the most amusing of the play, and she is given to saying brilliant and perfectly phrased announcements, such as: _Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 517). Through Miss Mabel‘s speech, it is possible to glimpse Wilde‘s game between trivial and serious, for Miss Mabel is one of the characters whose lines carry some degree of satire, which is one of Wilde‘s tools for criticising society.

Miss Mabel Chiltern has an unusual way of expressing herself. When Lord Goring declares his love for her, her words are quite astonishing:

> LORD GORING: Mabel, I have told you that I love you. Can‘t you love me a little in return?
> MABEL CHILTERN: You silly Arthur! If you knew anything about … anything, which you don‘t, you would know that I adore you. Every one in London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all (WILDE, 2003, p. 572).

She is not an ashamed young lady, and considering the Victorian patterns of behaviour, Miss Mabel is rather unconventional. Moreover, Miss Chiltern is also one of the most realistic characters in the play. In view of a plot that deals with projecting idealistic images which do not correspond to reality, she is extremely practical. When Lord Caversham tells his son, Lord Goring, that he should be an ideal husband to Miss Mabel, she asserts she would not want him to be ideal. In her opinion, Lord Goring may be whatever he chooses, as long as she gets to be a real wife to him. Her answer to Lord Caversham enables the audience to comprehend that Miss Mabel‘s relationship with

Lord Goring is going to be completely different from the Chilterns‘ marriage, for it will be based on a solid compromise rather than on romantic and naïve concepts.

Critical Reviews

Although the play was a great box-office success, some critics were distrustful whether Wilde‘s success would add much to his reputation as a playwright in the long run, as all those witty dialogues did not prove much of his capacity as a dramatist. A. B. Walkley is one such critic. In a review for the *Speaker* on 12 January 1895, he asserts that ‗Mr Wilde‘s play will not help the drama forward a single inch, nor [...] will it, in the long run, add to Mr Wilde‘s reputation...‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 179). Time has proved him wrong, as more than a century has passed and *An Ideal Husband* is still popular on stages in the United Kingdom.

H. G. Wells in an unsigned review for the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 4 January 1895, pointed out that Wilde‘s new production is ‗In many ways [...] diverting, and even where the fun is not of the rarest character the play remains interesting‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 172). However, he goes on to compare *An Ideal Husband* with the two previous comedies Wilde wrote and concludes that, after *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, it is rather disappointing.

George Bernard Shaw was quite an exception among the critics, as his review, published in the *Saturday Review* on 12 January 1895, praised Wilde‘s talent:

> Mr Wilde is to me our only thoroughly modern playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre. Such a feat scandalises the Englishman, who can no more play with wit and philosophy than he can with a football or a cricket bat. He works at both, and has the consolation, if he cannot make people laugh, of being the best cricketer and footballer on the world (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 176).

Shaw goes on to state that, being an Irishman, Wilde was skilled in ridiculing the Englishman‘s seriousness. For him, this was Wilde‘s main weapon of satire, which makes the play even funnier. Indeed, Shaw was not mistaken in pointing out one of Wilde‘s most acclaimed resources. Wilde mastered the game between the trivial and the serious, and his criticisms were always disguised under the cover of amusement. However, in *An Ideal Husband* Wilde‘s tool was developed to a further degree, for the game between trivial and serious evolved to be the game between real and ideal. As

Wilde ultimately points out, seriousness produces ideals that cannot correspond to reality, and the only way of coping with reality is by not taking it so seriously.

4.5 *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People was Oscar Wilde‘s last play, which opened on 14 February 1895 at St. James's Theatre in London. It is a farcical comedy in which the protagonists maintain fictitious personæ in order to escape burdensome social obligations.

Wilde‘s contemporary reviewers all praised the play‘s humour, though some were cautious about its lack of explicit social messages, while others foresaw the modern consensus that it was the culmination of Wilde‘s artistic career so far. Its high nonsensical tone and witty dialogue have helped make *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde‘s most enduringly popular play. It has been revived numerous times since its première, having been produced in London alone over 40 times[10] and adapted for the cinema on three occasions.

Currently the play is regarded as part of the western dramaturgical canon due to the brilliance of its dialogue. Richard Allen Cave, in the Introduction to an edition of Wilde‘s *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (2000), points out that ‗[f]or many, this is the enduring appeal of the plays, the seemingly effortless fount of wit which led W. H. Auden to describe *The Importance of Being Earnest* as ‗the purest example in English literature‘ of a ‗verbal opera‘ (AUDEN, 1968, p. 92 in WILDE, 2000, p. 8). Although Cave attributes Wilde‘s success to other reasons, especially Wilde‘s concept of total theatre,[11] it is undeniable that Wilde masters language. As a result, the play has several analytical and interpretative layers, which have turned it into a vast source of diverse critical studies, such as social history, gender studies, textual scholarship, theatre history, modernism anticipation, cosmopolitanism, and several others. Each theoretical perspective reveals a different layer in Wilde‘s texts. However, the subtexts were not always seen by the critics as, for many years after Wilde‘s death, the play was still considered as no more than a superficial comedy.

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[10] Professor Peter James Harris‘ table of presentation of Irish dramas in London‘s stages has been really helpful in establishing this number (HARRIS, 2011).

[11] Richard Allen Cave‘s words regarding Wilde‘s concept of total theatre were cited in the previous chapter.

The plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Wilde‘s most complex one, for it is filled with twists, and there is some bewilderment caused by mistaken identities, which results in a set of unexpected relations. The protagonist, John Worthing, is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, Lady Bracknell‘s daughter and Algernon Moncrieff‘s cousin. Lady Bracknell is clearly against any kind of relationship between her daughter and John Worthing, for she has found he is not suitable to be her son-in-law, due to the fact that he does not have any living relations. According to Lady Bracknell‘s perspective, _[t]o lose one parent [...] may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 21). As a child, John Worthing was found in a hand-bag in Victoria Station and he was adopted by the man who found him, Mr Thomas Cardew. Algernon is John‘s friend and as soon as he gets to know John‘s ward, Cecily Cardew, he falls in love with her. Cecily is Mr Thomas Cardew‘s granddaughter, and John Worthing is her tutor.

The complications are added due to the fact that both John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff present some imaginary associations. John has created an imaginary brother, Ernest Worthing, and Algernon has invented a fictional friend, the invalid Bunbury. As both John and Algernon speak of their invented relations as if they were real, everyone in the play believes in their existence. A curious detail comes from the fact that whenever John leaves his country house to help his invented brother, who always _gets into the most dreadful scrapes‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 13), John assumes the identity of the infamous Ernest Worthing. Therefore, he is known as Ernest in London. Algernon, in the same way John does, assumes the identity of his invalid friend whenever he alleges he is going to visit the poor Bunbury in the country. Algernon has even created a name for his escapades, _bunburying‘.

Wilde takes the complications to another level when the audience is informed that Gwendolen Fairfax only loves John Worthing due to the fact that she has always dreamed of getting married to a man named Ernest:

> JACK: Personally, darling, to speak quite candidly, I don‘t much care about the name of Ernest . . . I don‘t think the name suits me at all.
> GWENDOLEN: It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.
> JACK: Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.
> GWENDOLEN: Jack? . . . No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations . . . I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, *Jack is a notorious*

> *domesticity for John*! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment‘s solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest. (WILDE, 1994, p. 18, italics added)

As Gwendolen explains, Jack is a pet name for John, the character‘s real name. Nevertheless, Wilde chose to use the informal name in the text of his play, indicating that John‘s nature is so trivial that even his name is written informally.

Cecily Cardew, in her turn, is also fascinated by the figure of Ernest Worthing, due to the fact that he has always been badly talked about, and his supposed wickedness has made her even create an imaginary relationship between herself and her tutor‘s imaginary brother, Ernest.

The tricky situation is close to its climax when John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff arrive simultaneously at John‘s country house with news of Ernest. John affirms that his brother is dead, for he wants to get rid of his imaginary brother in order to get married to Gwendolen. Nevertheless, Algernon appears saying he is Ernest Worthing, for he wants to meet Cecily Cardew, who was described by John as an excessively pretty young lady, who is far too interested in John‘s fake brother ‗Ernest‘. Soon afterwards, Gwendolen also arrives at John‘s country house, having decided to pay an unexpected visit. Gwendolen and Cecily confront each other when they discover both are to be married a man named Ernest Worthing. After all, John‘s and Algernon‘s fake identities are revealed, and the only thing that still prevents the couples from being together is Lady Bracknell‘s disapproval of John Worthing.

Everything ends happily since Miss Prism, the Governess in John Worthing‘s house, is found out to be the same person who disappeared with Lady Bracknell‘s nephew twenty-eight years before. Miss Prism confesses that she absent-mindedly put the baby in a hand-bag, which she left in Victoria Station. At last, John Worthing is found out to be Lady Bracknell‘s nephew and Algernon Moncrieff‘s older brother. As the eldest son, he was named after his father, and his real name is Ernest John.

John is the play‘s main protagonist, and he utters the sentence that refers to the play‘s title: ‗I‘ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 67). John is characterised as someone who can lie to his own benefit, and so he can hardly be considered ‗earnest‘. Therefore, he has an identity paradox, which starts with the impossibility of being earnest while claiming to be Ernest. John is, in fact, extremely dishonest, for, with all his lies, he tries to take advantage of every situation. When he is questioned about his dishonesty, he shows this

is his main characteristic: _GWENDOLEN: Is your name really John? / JACK (*standing rather proudly*): I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years' (WILDE, 1994, p. 49). Even when confronted, he is still proud of being able to discharge himself from telling the truth. Moreover, he never lies for his own delight, as Algernon does, but always to exploit circumstances for his own benefit. He tries to be serious even when he is lying, in order to have some pleasure, as he alleges that that is the reason why he is John in the country and Ernest in the city. John is averse to the use of witticisms and epigrams, which shows his lack of humour:

> JACK: I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever nowadays. You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.
> ALGERNON: We have.
> JACK: I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?
> ALGERNON: The fools? Oh! about the clever people, of course.
> JACK: What fools (WILDE, 1994, p. 24).

Except for John, Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble, every other character likes to express themselves through witticisms. Although John's naivety produces a funny effect, he is characterised as a serious man. John lacks humour and triviality, therefore his views and behaviour do not present the lightness of Algernon's. John's gravity is to some extent mocked, especially when it is opposed to Algernon's frivolity. Whenever John tries to be inconsequential, he fails, for he is extremely committed to the values he holds when he assumes the personality of John Worthing. John can be judged witless; therefore, he cannot be considered a dandy.

At the end of the play John realises that he seems to have dissipated his identity paradox, since he can finally accept that he is Ernest John and, being so, he will no longer need to conceal his wickedness or adopt a serious position. At last he can assume both his trivial and serious identities as one.

Although John Worthing is the protagonist, Algernon is the character who mostly holds the audience attention. He is one of the most brilliant characters in the play. His witticisms make him a perfect dandy, since he carries all the attributes related to a dandy. He is witty, funny, ironic, sharp and trivial, and his manners are shallow and wicked. He sustains a pose and is deeply concerned about appearances. Through his speech it is possible to glimpse Wilde's veiled criticism. Like John, Algernon, the secondary hero, also has a fictitious friend who gives him the chance to escape from his

boring social obligations. From the beginning of the play, the audience realises that Algernon is completely immoral. He does not even try to hide it from his closest friends; he confesses he has invented Bunbury, without ever being challenged to tell the truth about his fake friend. Algernon does not attempt to have a respectable image, nor does he impersonate his imaginary friend. He lies for his own pleasure and does not care if he is caught lying. That is what amuses him the most, as one may see in the sequence when he and John are talking, after the girls have discovered their true identities:

> JACK: This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying, I suppose?
> ALGERNON: Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life.
> JACK: Well, you‘ve no right whatsoever to Bunbury here.
> ALGERNON: That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunburyist knows that.
> JACK: Serious Bunburyist? Good heavens!
> ALGERNON: Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven‘t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature (WILDE, 1994, p. 50).

Just as he is serious about Bunburying, Algernon is also used to being serious about fiction, which he ends up taking seriously and truthfully. He does so when he agrees with Cecily that they were engaged before they had even met. Algernon also does that when he impersonates John‘s younger brother, Ernest Worthing:

> JACK: [...] I have a perfect right to be christened if I like. There is no evidence at all that I have ever been christened by anybody. I should think it extremely probable I never was, and so does Dr. Chasuble. It is entirely different in your case. You have been christened already.
> ALGERNON: Yes, but I have not been christened for years.
> JACK: Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.
> ALGERNON: Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it. If you are not quite sure about your ever having been christened, I must say I think it rather dangerous your venturing on it now. It might make you very unwell. You can hardly have forgotten that someone very closely connected with you was very nearly carried off this week in Paris by a severe chill.
> JACK: Yes, but you said yourself that a severe chill was not hereditary.
> ALGERNON: It usen‘t to be, I know – but I daresay it is now. Science is always making wonderful improvements in things (WILDE, 1994, p. 52).

Thus, not only does Algernon assume that the fictional existence of Ernest is true, but he also assumes that John will not realise he is being manipulated, for it is quite absurd

to say that one could inherit a disease from a fictional brother. On the other hand, John is so naïve that he is swayed by Algernon‘s arguments.

As a dandy, Algernon likes to express himself through witticisms, and is always uttering absurdities. Algernon‘s paradoxes produce the most hilarious situations throughout the play and he is the one to blame for the comical qualities of the dialogue. He is subtle, intriguing and smart, which is why he attracts more attention than John.

Being immoral and wicked, Algernon is the ideal match for Cecily, as she is intrigued by wickedness. In fact, wickedness is more important to her than the name _Ernest‘, since, at the end of the play, she is happy to be with Algernon, because he is as wicked as she expected:

> ALGERNON [*raising his hat*]: You are my little cousin Cecily, I‘m sure.
> CECILY: You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. [*Algernon is rather taken aback.*] But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack‘s brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.
> ALGERNON: Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn‘t think that I am wicked.
> CECILY: If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.
> ALGERNON [*looks at her in amazement*]: Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.
> CECILY: I am glad to hear it (WILDE, 1994, p. 31).

Algernon was prepared to accept Cecily demanding his sincerity, but he is evidently surprised by her demanding his wickedness. Cecily‘s sincerity demonstrates that she is not hypocritical, as she does not try to hide her curiosity about wickedness. Thus, she is Algernon‘s perfect partner.

In fact, sincerity is one of the most remarkable characteristics of Cecily Cardew, as she does not wear the _shallow mask of manners‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 46), since it does not suit her. Even though she is neither a moralist nor a conservative, she is quite truthful. She is sincere without being naïve; she is frank and, yet, feels attracted by wickedness. She has such uneven qualities that they make her a delightful character. Cecily‘s frankness is quite astonishing, for her remarks are rather open. Such is the case when she and Gwendolen first meet, and Gwendolen asks Cecily if she would mind being looked at through Gwendolen‘s glasses. Cecily‘s answer is astoundingly genuine: _I am very fond of being looked at‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 44). She is honest enough to

admit that she likes to be admired, and she has no false modesty: she is quite aware of her beauty.

Cecily‘s awareness of her beauty is also shown in the dialogue between her and Miss Prism, when Miss Prism directs her to her German lesson and Cecily argues that she does not like German. Her explanation about her disliking the subject is quite hilarious: ‗But I don‘t like German. It isn‘t at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 28). Cecily is aware that she is bored by her German lessons, which consequently makes her look unattractive. Furthermore, she considers beauty more important than knowledge, because she does not want to learn an unattractive language which makes her feel unappealing too.

As open and sincere as Cecily is, for her it is not a problem to admit she feels an attraction for the idea of wickedness. In fact, her fascination for wickedness may qualify her as at least unconventional, considering Victorian standards for educated girls. When Cecily discovers Ernest is in the country house, she tells herself: ‗I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like every one else. [*Enter Algernon, very gay and debonair.*] He does!‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 31). At first, Cecily is disappointed to realise that, even though he may be immoral, he seems to be devoid of the irresistible attraction: wickedness. Nevertheless, her expectation is met when he confirms he has been ‗rather reckless‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 31).

Cecily is also creative and inventive. She is the one who invented her engagement to Ernest, after all. As Algernon has created the whole history of Bunbury regardless of proof, Cecily has invented an entire love story between herself and Ernest Worthing, and the only proof of existence of their relationship is her diary. In her diary, Cecily claims she keeps a record of her memories:

> MISS PRISM: […] You must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don‘t see why you should keep a diary at all.
> CECILY: I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn‘t write them down, I should probably forget all about them.
> MISS PRISM: Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.
> CECILY: Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn‘t possibly have happened. I believe that

> Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie[12] sends us (WILDE, 1994, p. 29).

Although her memories are of things that she herself has invented, she sees them as her reality. For her, reality acquires a new meaning, for, if she records something in her diary, the incident becomes true.

As Algernon‘s match, Cecily presents similarities with him in terms of characterisation; she is also shallow, worried about appearances, fascinated by wickedness, creative, smart and sharp. As Algernon‘s feminine counterpart, Cecily may also be considered a dandy. She is depicted as the feminine version of Wilde‘s most remarkable character, and through her voice, the author also expresses his disguised critical thoughts.

Event though Cecily may be regarded as a dandy due to her similarities with Algernon, she is not the only female dandy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Gwendolen Fairfax, John‘s loved one, is also an unconventional character, concerned primarily with appearances, and fond of using witticisms and epigrams. Gwendolen shows that appearances are important for her when she states that she would like John to demonstrate his feelings openly. Although Gwendolen reciprocates John‘s love, she would like him to behave in an ostentatious way regarding public displays of affection. Gwendolen is also obstinate about getting married to a man whose name is Ernest:

> JACK: Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.
> GWENDOLEN: Jack? ... No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations… I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment‘s solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest (WILDE, 1994, p. 18).

Gwendolen is determined to make her dream come true, and her dream is to have a husband whose name is Ernest. She lives in an age of ideals, as she comments, and her

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[12] Between 1842 and 1894, Charles Edward Mudie created a library in which readers were subscribers and, by paying a fee, they could borrow an unlimited number of books. According to George P. Landow, Charles Edward Mudie's lending library influenced Victorian literature, particularly fiction, in two chief ways: first, by making sure that almost all novels appeared in three volumes, it had important effects on the structure, plot, style, and even imaginative worlds of the Victorian novel; and second, by acting as a censor who demanded fiction suited to the middle-class family, it controlled the subject, scope, and morality of the novel for fifty years‘ (Landow, 1972, p. 367). As there were no public libraries at that time, Mudie‘s lending library was really successful, for he bought large quantities of books and his readers did not have to wait so long to read the most popular novels.

goal is to live truly by her belief that there is a deeper meaning in triviality than is generally supposed. Therefore, an irrelevant thing such as the name of her partner-to-be acquires a substantial significance, for it carries the impression to inspire _absolute confidence‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 17).

Like Cecily, Gwendolen also defies conventionality, and her behaviour is marked by self-confidence and determination, which results in her manipulation of John‘s conduct towards her. As John is naïve, he is easily guided by Gwendolen to meet her expectations, especially when she manipulates John‘s proposal:

> JACK: Gwendolen, I must get christened at once – I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.
> GWENDOLEN: Married, Mr. Worthing?
> JACK [*astounded*]: Well … surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.
> GWENDOLEN: I adore you. But you haven‘t proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.
> JACK: Well ... may I propose to you now?
> GWENDOLEN: I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it is only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.
> JACK: Gwendolen! (WILDE, 1994, p. 18-9).

As John blurts out the word _marriage‘, Gwendolen seizes the opportunity to manoeuvre him into proposing to her in the conventional way. Furthermore, she breaks the rules when she gives her answer beforehand. Therefore, Gwendolen is an unpredictable and avant-garde character, since she is audacious if compared to the ordinary modest Victorian girl.

Gwendolen‘s unconventionality is reflected in her speech, which is filled with epigrams and witticisms. Gwendolen‘s speech is congruent with all her characteristics. It reproduces her concern with appearances, her determination and also her dandiacal features:

> CECILY: [*To Gwendolen.*] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?
> GWENDOLEN: Yes, dear, if you can believe him.
> CECILY: I don‘t. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.
> GWENDOLEN: True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?
> JACK: Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

> GWENDOLEN: I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism (WILDE, 1994, p. 55).

Gwendolen shows how concerned she is about style, especially with regard to speech. Moreover, her behaviour is quite ahead of her time when she decides to choose not to analyse the veracity of John‘s words. For Gwendolen, truth is easily replaced by beauty. Her speech is a greater source of admiration as she mentions German scepticism. She is unconventionally familiar with German philosophy, which is quite uncommon for her position. She is expected to be as frivolous as she is spoiled. Another remarkable point is that Gwendolen does not scorn German scepticism. When she argues that it is not the adequate moment to discuss the existence of an absolute knowledge, she is not saying that scepticism is not worth discussing; instead, she is emphasising that she will not introduce it into the discussion, for, if she does, she will cause doubt on certainties, which will no longer enable her to believe Jack‘s trustfulness. Therefore, she prefers to pretend he has not lied to her in order to keep him unscathed.

Gwendolen is said to be predestined to become like her mother, Lady Bracknell. After all, _all women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That‘s his‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 24). In fact, Gwendolen can be said to have inherited some characteristics from Lady Bracknell. Both of them are determined and manipulative. Moreover, they are driven by their worry about appearances and they defy traditionalism. It is important to clarify that both Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are traditionalists. However, they tend to adjust society‘s rules in their favour.

The only unequal point between Lady Bracknell and her daughter is the fact that they have different goals. Whereas Gwendolen is determined to get married to a man named Ernest, Lady Bracknell is resolute about finding an eligible fiancé for her daughter, that is, a man who belongs to high society. Therefore, Lady Bracknell‘s family principles are related to money and social rank. Her interest in money becomes more evident when she finds out about Cecily‘s wealth:

> LADY BRACKNELL: As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?
> JOHN: Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all. Goodbye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.
> LADY BRACKNELL [*sitting down again*]: A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. [...] [*To Cecily.*] Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has

> nothing but his debts to depend upon. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent (WILDE, 1994, p. 58).

It is remarkable that Lady Bracknell does not consider her own wedding to have been mercenary. As determined as she is, Lady Bracknell is ready to rework tradition in order to make it adequate to her needs. Thus, she has rephrased the concept of mercenary wedding so that her own wedding will not fit the category. As Lady Bracknell was cunning enough to manipulate society so that she could belong to it, it is perfectly comprehensible that she thinks that one should „[n]ever speak disrespectfully of Society [...]. Only people who can‘t get into it do that‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 59).

In fact, her ability to manipulate things in her favour is a characteristic shown from the beginning of the play. When Lady Bracknell interviews John to see if he is eligible to get married to her daughter, she discovers that his house in London is on the unfashionable side of Belgrave Square, but she quickly adds that „that could easily be altered‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 21). As John asks her, „Do you mean the fashion, or the side?‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 21), she sternly answers, „Both, if necessary, I presume‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 21). Ultimately, Lady Bracknell shows she is prepared to alter whatever is necessary – principles, values, fashion and even geography – in order to make it suit her requirements.

As John is not suitable to get married to her daughter, Lady Bracknell does not give her consent to their relationship and, by doing so, she ends up playing the role of the obstacle to the romance of both couples. When she forbids Gwendolen and John from getting married, she prevents the romance between Algernon and Cecily too, as John states that he will not give his ward the consent to get married to Algernon unless he gets Lady Bracknell‘s consent first. Either as a matter of coincidence or fate, in the end John is Lady Bracknell‘s nephew, a fact that makes him suitable to occupy the place of her son-in-law.

As both couples, John and Gwendolen and Algernon and Cecily are united at the end of the play, Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble, the reverend at John‘s country house, spot an opportunity to form a romantic bond too. Throughout the play several signs show there is a physical attraction between them, although they always try to maintain respectability:

> CHASUBLE: I hope, Cecily, you are not inattentive.

> CECILY: Oh, I am afraid I am.
> CHASUBLE: That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism‘s pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [*Miss Prism glares.*] I spoke metaphorically. – My metaphor was drawn from bees (WILDE, 1994, p. 30).

Even when he tries to say he would pay strict attention to every word she said, Dr Chasuble ends up saying he would pay attention to her lips, as if he would like to kiss them. His attempt to justify his statement becomes ridiculous, since it does not seem to have any coherence.

Miss Prism, in her turn, is astute when she tries to convince the canon to get married to her:

> MISS PRISM: You are too much alone, dear Dr Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand — a womanthrope, never!
> CHASUBLE [*with a scholar’s shudder*]: Believe me, I do not deserve so neologistic a phrase. The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony.
> MISS PRISM [*sententiously*]: That is obviously the reason why the Primitive Church has not lasted up to the present day. And you do not seem to realise, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray (WILDE, 1994, p. 33).

Even though Miss Prism is so traditional, she wants to change the Primitive Church, as long as these changes are in her favour. Besides, her passion for the reverend becomes explicit as she considers him a public temptation, which is a very daring and not so respectful attitude, considering the standard behaviour expected from a single woman at her age.

Yet, long before the end of the play, it is already possible to see that they are the perfect couple. Both are middle-aged people, whose utilitarian and didactic functions in the house show how they appreciate a high morality, even if it is only on the surface. Nevertheless, Miss Prism is much stricter than Dr Chasuble, especially when she expresses her disapproval of the cause of Ernest‘s death:

> CHASUBLE: Your brother Ernest dead?
> JACK: Quite dead.
> MISS PRISM: What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.
> CHASUBLE: Mr. Worthing, I offer you my sincere condolence. You have at least the consolation of knowing that you were always the most generous and forgiving of brothers.
> JACK: Poor Ernest! He had many faults, but it is a sad, sad blow.
> CHASUBLE: Very sad indeed. Were you with him at the end?
> JACK: No. He died abroad; in Paris, in fact. I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel.

> CHASUBLE: Was the cause of death mentioned?
> JACK: A severe chill, it seems.
> MISS PRISM: As a man sows, so shall he reap.
> CHASUBLE [*raising his hand*]: Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity! None of us are perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts (WILDE, 1994, p. 34).

In this extract, Miss Prism assumes that Jack‘s brother, Ernest, overindulged his whole life, may have caught the severe chill which killed him in one night of spree. That is why she gives her ‗judging sentence‘ saying that he must obtain a result from his deeds. Dr. Chasuble, however, does not seem to understand this meaning in Miss Prism‘s words, for he claims he is susceptible to draughts, as if Jack‘s brother could have caught a severe chill due to being exposed to currents of air.

Both Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble have corresponding behaviour, manifested by a severe moral code and Puritanical behaviour, symbolising the stern moral standards in Victorian society. As Puritans are strict in moral or religious attitudes, especially in shunning sensual pleasures, Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble‘s passion for each other is presented as secret appetites, which denounces that their morality lies on the surface. Therefore, the actions of both characters can be seen as a criticism of the hypocrisy of Victorian society.

Besides being characterised as a hypocritical middle-aged woman, Miss Prism is also presented to the audience through the dialogue of other characters. In Act Three, the audience has already formed an opinion about her. However, when Lady Bracknell and Dr. Chasuble respectively describe Miss Prism as ‗a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 62) and as ‗the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability‘, (WILDE, 1994, p. 63), the audience has the opportunity to choose whether they share Lady Bracknell‘s or Dr. Chasuble‘s perspective. Lady Bracknell‘s answer to Dr Chasuble‘s angry answer is rather intriguing – ‗It is obviously the same person‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 63) – for it shows that Lady Bracknell is aware that Dr. Chasuble and she herself have different opinions of the same person. In fact, their mismatched descriptions of Miss Prism reveal more about themselves than about Miss Prism, for the audience can apprehend more about Lady Bracknell‘s and Dr. Chasuble‘s points of view. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde uses the two resources of characterisation he has at his disposal, that is, characters‘ descriptions of other characters and also their own actions, and, noticeably, he takes these resources to another level, as he employs descriptions that expose the

describers more than the described. Therefore, Wilde shows that from his first comedy to his last one, he developed his playwright‘s abilities, for he learned how to use them in favour of the comic aspects of the play.

Critical Reviews

The Importance of Being Earnest, as mentioned, was firstly considered a brilliant comedy, as entertainment, but it was believed to be shallow and purposeless in relation to content. H. G. Wells, in a review for the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 15 February 1895, praised the play‘s humour, although he said it was _very good nonsense‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 187). William Archer had a similar position, for he stated that,

> [i]t is delightful to see, it sends wave after wave of laughter curling and foaming round the theatre; but as a text for criticism it is barren and delusive. It is like a mirage-oasis in the desert, grateful and comforting to the weary eye – but when you come close up to it, behold! it is intangible, it eludes your grasp. What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality? (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 189-90).

Thus, Archer considered that the play had nothing else to offer beyond its author‘s personality. In fact, over the years, William Archer was proved partly right, for *The Importance of Being Earnest* really created its own canons and conventions, although, at the time, he failed to understand the artistic principles underlying them.

George Bernard Shaw also did not like the play, as he said in a review in *Saturday Review* on 23 February 1895, that _it was perhaps the first which [Wilde] designed for practical commercial use at the West End theatres‘ (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 194, notes added). Shaw could not accept a play which did not address social and political problems.

An exception may be added in the case of A. B. Walkley, who wrote a very positive review for the *Speaker* on 23 February 1895:

> I declare Mr Oscar Wilde to have _found himself‘, at last, as an artist in sheer nonsense. There has been good nonsense in his previous stage-work, but it failed to give unalloyed pleasure, either because it adopted serious postures or was out of harmony with an environment of seriousness. (qtd in BECKSON, 1970, p. 196)

Walkley goes on to give a well-supported explanation about the reason why the audience laughs in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and he concludes that it is the

combination of the natural and the absurd that produces laughter. Moreover, Walkley sees nothing derogatory in considering the play a farce, as many other critics did. For most critics, the nonsensical elements are seen as a pure source of amusement, which deprives the play other artistic qualities. From Walkley‘s point of view, however, the fact that the play can be considered a farce is not a negative point. Therefore, he praises Wilde for his control of the audience through laughter.

As time passed, critics started considering *The Importance of Being Earnest* a very rich play in terms of dialogue, for the text has several layers which can be analysed according to diverse literary currents. From a shallow play, Wilde‘s last dramatic work passed to the status of a work of art, for the richness of its meanings seems to be quite endless. Wilde‘s last play tops off his prematurely curtailed career as a successful playwright, for *The Importance of Being Earnest* was the most brilliant comedy Wilde ever wrote, although it took critics almost half a century to recognise the author‘s mastery of the elements of theatre.

Oscar Wilde‘s plays were developed in a sequence that may seem ordered, for he departs from tragedies and goes on to comedies, in a smooth progression. Each of the tragedies works as a step taken in the direction of the next, in a descending scale of melodrama. Similarly, each of the comedies obeys an order of succession on the level of comicality, which is an ascending progress. It must be stressed that, from his first until his last play, Wilde created his plays as an organic whole, not only in relation to dialogue but also characterisation, plot, scenery, costumes, gestures and music. All these elements are essentially given importance by Wilde, which makes each play a unified piece of art.

Once more, Wilde proved that he was able to truly create enduring works of art. From his first play, *Vera, or The Nihislists*, to his last one, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde‘s development as a dramatist is evident. As works of art, his plays support a wide range of studies and interpretations, but, most importantly, they are kept alive on stages worldwide.

5. The Incidence of Wilde's Aesthetic Theories in His Plays

As was observed in the previous chapter, Wilde's plays have several characteristics that are systematically elaborated throughout his dramatic works. His plays are notable for the repetition of types of characters, themes, plot development and even characters' statements. In addition to helping to establish Wilde's trademarks, the recurrence of these features in his works also reveals continuity from one play to another. The reappearance of these elements allows theatre audiences, critics and readers of Wilde's dramatic works to apprehend that he gradually develops his plays with ever greater complexity and sophistication, culminating in his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Although most of the recurrent facets of Wilde's plays were mentioned in the previous chapter, there is still one unmentioned persistent element that appears consistently in all his dramatic works: Wildean Aestheticism. As clarified earlier, the main objective of this thesis is the analysis of Oscar Wilde's plays focused on his utilisation of his own aesthetic theories, in such a way as to verify whether any alteration happens in the process of transposing theory into practice. Wilde's writings on his aesthetic theories are now going to be addressed in order to comprehend the devices he used to divulge his version of Aestheticism throughout the course of his dramatic oeuvre.

Due to the fact that much has already been said regarding theory and practice separately, it will sometimes be necessary to refer back to aspects already cited, in order to proceed to the discussion and establish the referred comparison. Such is the case of the dandy, a special type of character who happens to be one of the afore mentioned recurrent aspects in Wilde's plays.

Some other elements, referred to in passing in the previous chapter, are going to be analysed in greater depth. The comments are classified according to categories, which allow the arrangement of Wilde's aesthetic theories under groups that appear throughout his dramatic composition. As will be made clear, just as Wilde repeats types of character, themes, plot arrangement and individual lines, so he reiterates his aesthetic ideas, using different forms to establish his theoretical concepts in his practical theatrical compositions.

5.1 Aesthetics vs. Ethics

As was mentioned in the first chapter, in his essay ‗The Critic as Artist', Oscar Wilde makes a distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics, saying that they belong to different spheres. This distinction is present in all the plays through the discourse of some of the characters, from the very outset of Wilde's career as a playwright, when he wrote *Vera, or The Nihilists* to his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In *Vera, or The Nihilists*, this distinction is made only once, through Prince Paul's comment that reveals he is happy to be regarded as a wicked person. Prince Paul's comment is followed by the Czarevitch's observation on Prince Paul's nature, in the Second Act, while the Czar's ministers and the Czarevitch are waiting for the arrival of the Czar:

> CZAREVITCH (*coming back from the window*): I don't think Prince Paul's nature is such a mystery. He would stab his best friend for the sake of writing an epigram on his tombstone, or experiencing a new sensation.
> PRINCE PAUL: Parbleu! I would sooner lose my best friend than my worst enemy. To have friends, you know, one need only be good-natured; but when a man has no enemy left there must be something mean about him.
> CZAREVITCH (*bitterly*): If to have enemies is a measure of greatness, then you must be a Colossus, indeed, Prince (WILDE, 2003, p. 698).

Prince Paul is a character who has some dandiacal features. He is ironic, smart and cunning, and his speech is witty. With such traits, his position is analogous to that of the Aesthetic philosopher, and yet he is the play's villain. This coincidence is made possible due to the fact that Wilde considered aesthetics and ethics to be separate spheres: therefore, the Aesthetic philosopher does not necessarily need to be a good character. However, even if the division between aesthetics and ethics enables Prince Paul to be immoral, he does not embody aesthetic values related to the main criterion of Wildean Aestheticism, beauty, and, therefore, he cannot be said to be a true dandy.

In his second tragedy, *The Duchess of Padua*, Wilde enables the distinction between aesthetics and ethics to be recognised when Simone Gesso, the Duke of Padua, states his disdain for ethics and morals, positioning himself against righteous values. Occasionally, his posture corresponds to that of the aesthetic upholder Wilde described in *The Critic as Artist*, for he places aesthetics over ethics. This may be seen in the

following dialogue, when the Duke is talking to some citizens of Padua, who are praying for the governor‘s mercy:

> DUKE: […] [*To the Citizens*.]
> Well my good loyal citizens of Padua,
> Still as our gentle Duchess has so prayed us,
> And to refuse so beautiful a beggar
> Were to lack both courtesy and love,
> Touching your grievances, I promise this—
> FIRST CITIZEN: Marry, he will lighten the taxes!
> SECOND CITIZEN: Or a dole of bread, think you, for each man?
> DUKE: That, on next Sunday, the Lord Cardinal
> Shall, after Holy Mass, preach you a sermon
> Upon the Beauty of Obedience (WILDE, 2003, p. 622-3).

When the Duke states that the people need to learn the *beauty* of obedience, rather than have their needs met, he is not being a fair leader, but he is emphasising that good behaviour – on the people‘s part, not on his – is seen as exquisite. The Duke qualifies manners according to Aesthetic criteria; hence, for him, ‗Aesthetics are higher than ethics‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1154).

There is also some resonance of aestheticism in the Duke‘s speech in the following extract, when he threatens the Duchess due to her daring requests in favour of the people, in the second act:

> DUKE […]: While I am Duke in Padua: listen, Madam,
> I am grown weary of your airs and graces,
> Being mine own, you shall do as I will,
> And if it be my will you keep the house,
> Why then, this palace shall your prison be;
> And if it be my will you walk abroad,
> Why, you shall take the air from morn to night.
> DUCHESS: Sir, by what right—?
> DUKE: Madam, my second Duchess
> Asked the same question once: her monument
> Lies in the chapel of Bartholomew,
> Wrought in red marble; very beautiful (WILDE, 2003, p. 625).

While the Duke threatens to punish the Duchess for her boldness, he makes her aware of the fact that he considers the monument in homage of his former Duchess to be very beautiful, which reveals that even in his most cruel manners, he is susceptible to the charm of the most important aesthetic concept: beauty. Therefore, the Duke presents a conception of beauty according to which he is able to judge the beauty of an object. The fact that the Duke‘s ironic and sharp comment is intended to demonstrate that he has the power to decide if he has the right to kill someone reveals that the Duke is extremely

cruel. However, his brutality does not prevent him from presenting a sharp aesthetic sense. Aesthetics and ethics belong to different realms, after all.

The distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics also applies in Wilde‘s third play, *Salomé*, in the characters of Salomé and Jokanaan. Whereas Salomé represents the sphere of aesthetics, mainly for her search for beauty, Jokanaan represents the sphere of ethics, as his speech carries a high moral tone. They belong to different realms; therefore, they can never belong together.

Every time Jokanaan speaks about the Messiah and admonishes Salomé and her family for their sins, he stands up for his religion. However, Salomé does not seem to take his prophecies and sermons seriously, since she is so disturbed by his beauty. Salomé‘s desire for Jokanaan is repugnant for him, and he continually tries to repel her:

> JOKANAAN: Back! Daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the Lord. Thy mother hath filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities, and the cry of her sins hath come up even to the ears of God.
> SALOMÉ: Speak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me (WILDE, 2003, p. 589).

Clearly, Salomé is so involved in her feelings that she is completely oblivious to the content of Jokanaan‘s speech, caring only for the beauty of his voice. In fact, as aesthetics is separated from ethics, the aesthetic motto of ‗art for art‘s sake‘ summarises the belief that art does not have to serve a specific purpose, neither a moral nor a didactic one. Art stands out purely for its beauty. In *Salomé*, this aspect of Wilde‘s aesthetic criticism is represented in the plot, since the protagonist‘s behaviour is not moral and her actions are determined by her perception of what is beautiful to her eyes. That is the main reason that Salomé does not care about what Jokanaan prophesies. Instead, she focuses her attention on the beauty of his physical appearance.

The difference between Aesthetics and Ethics does not appear only in the tragedies, but also in the comedies. In Wilde‘s first comedy, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, there are many examples of the separation of aesthetics and ethics. Every time any character refers to morality as boring, they are equating ethics with a dull attitude towards life. It is worth remembering Wilde‘s remark in ‗The Truth of Masks‘, ‗in aesthetic criticism, attitude is everything‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1173). Hence, an aesthetic position requires an interesting attitude, which is also achieved through immoral behaviour. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Lord Darlington is one of the most dissolute characters:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK [...]: Dear Margaret, I am so pleased to see you. You remember Agatha, don‘t you? [...] How do you do, Lord Darlington? I won‘t let you know my daughter, you are far too wicked.
> LORD DARLINGTON: Don‘t say that, Duchess. As a wicked man I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. Of course they only say it behind my back (WILDE, 2003, p. 424).

Lord Darlington, one of the most important dandies in the play, is wicked and immoral, which coincides with someone seen as aesthetically interesting. Nevertheless, he denies being wicked, for being recognised (as depraved) is being found out, as Lord Darlington himself mentions. Thus, he prefers to maintain an unintelligible posture, which would give him a post of vantage, for it would allow him to keep his true identity to himself.

Another instance of immoral behaviour described by the Duchess of Berwick is given at the beginning of the first act, when the Duchess pays a visit to Lady Windermere and tells her that Lord Windermere has some kind of obscure relationship with Mrs Erlynne. The Duchess of Berwick refers to Mrs Erlynne‘s appearance and attitude:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Oh, on account of that horrid woman. She dresses so well, too, which makes it much worse, sets such a dreadful example. […] Many a woman has a past, but I am told that she has at least a dozen, and that they all fit (WILDE, 2003, p. 425-6).

Mrs Erlynne‘s good taste for clothes and her immoral behaviour are both characteristics that make her even more appealing to the audience. The spectators, in their turn, still do not know Mrs Erlynne and are interested in meeting the dandy that other characters talk so much about. The exaggeration in the Duchess‘ description when she affirms that Mrs Erlynne is said to have at least a dozen pasts is intended not only to characterise Mrs Erlynne as a woman who has a notorious bad reputation, but also to show how the Duchess is able to spread rumours. Mrs Erlynne‘s infamy is counterposed to her habit of dressing well and the fact that the Duchess of Berwick states that Mrs Erlynne‘s appearance sets a dreadful example is revealing, for it implies that people will follow her bad behaviour based only on the fact that she is well-dressed. Therefore, aesthetics is presented as being higher than ethics, for a woman who has a highly developed aesthetic taste is able to influence the moral behaviour of many people.

When the male characters are together in Lord Darlington‘s house, in the third act, they keep talking about Mrs Erlynne, and each of them has a different perspective. Whereas Dumby and Cecil Graham present an especially ironic image of Mrs Erlynne,

Lord Augustus believes in a more idealistic figure, for Lord Augustus is in love with Mrs Erlynne:

> DUMBY: Awfully commercial, women nowadays. [...]
> LORD AUGUSTUS: You want to make her out a wicked woman. She is not!
> CECIL GRAHAM: Oh! Wicked women bother one. Good women bore one. That is the only difference between them.
> LORD AUGUSTUS *(puffing a cigar)*: Mrs Erlynne has a future before her.
> DUMBY: Mrs Erlynne has a past before her.
> LORD AUGUSTUS: I prefer women with a past. They‘re always so demmed amusing to talk to.
> CECIL GRAHAM: Well, you‘ll have lots of topics of conversation with her, Tuppy (WILDE, 2003, p. 450).

Mrs Erlynne exerts a fascination over Lord Augustus, who is able to excuse every single bad characteristic she is supposed to have. Dumby and Cecil Graham are highly sarcastic when referring to Mrs Erlynne‘s wickedness, but their position makes Lord Augustus feel more and more interested in her. As Mrs Erlynne is a dandy, her wickedness does not influence the fact that she is characterised as aesthetically responsive throughout *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

In the same scene in Lord Darlington‘s house, Lord Windermere supports Mrs Erlynne against Dumby‘s and Cecil Graham‘s charges, which is quite curious, since she has been demanding large amounts of money from him. Actually, Lord Windermere believes that Mrs Erlynne regrets her past and wants to make a fresh start, even if she needs money to do so. Lord Windermere is still willing to help her to restart her life in London society, although he reverses his previously held opinion about her after meeting her in Lord Darlington‘s house:

> LORD WINDERMERE: Dumby, you are ridiculous, and Cecil, you let your tongue run away with you. You must leave Mrs Erlynne alone. You don‘t really know anything about her, and you‘re always talking scandal against her.
> CECIL GRAHAM [...]: My dear Arthur, I never talk scandal. I only talk gossip.
> LORD WINDERMERE: What is the difference between scandal and gossip?
> CECIL GRAHAM: Oh! gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality. Now, I never moralise. A man who moralises is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralises is invariably plain. There is nothing in the whole world so unbecoming to a woman as a Nonconformist conscience. And most women know it, I‘m glad to say (WILDE, 2003, p. 451).

Nevertheless, in this scene, the most important point, regarding the difference between aesthetics and ethics, is the difference Cecil Graham establishes between gossip and scandal. When Cecil associates women‘s beauty to immorality, he is making a differentiation between aesthetics and ethics, for, in order to be beautiful, one does not need to have high ethical principles. Instead, for Cecil Graham, to remain beautiful, a woman necessarily has to be immoral, for expressing moral judgments makes a woman look serious and, therefore, unattractive.

Dumby and Cecil Graham go on to disapprove of the fact that Lord Windermere does not want to play cards with them, and Dumby makes a sarcastic remark about marriage, attributing the fact that Lord Windermere does not want to play cards to the fact that he is a married man and, as such, he is committed to the seriousness necessary to his position:

> CECIL GRAHAM: I say, Darlington, let us have some cards. You'll play, Arthur, won't you?
> LORD WINDERMERE: No, thanks, Cecil.
> DUMBY*(with a sigh)*: Good heavens! How marriage ruins a man! It's as demoralizing as cigarettes, and far more expensive (WILDE, 2003, p. 451).

As Dumby associates Lord Windermere‘s unwillingness to play cards with a lack of triviality and ability to enjoy leisure activities, he is replacing the ethical code with an aesthetic one, as if having no desire for the life of pleasures were the same as having no principles left. Seriousness, which is associated with morality, leaves no room for pleasure-seeking, which is connected to Wildean aestheticism.

In the same scene, while the men are talking, Lord Darlington asserts that his loved one – Lady Windermere – is the only good woman he has ever met, but Cecil Graham disdains good women. At this point, it becomes clear that Lord Darlington and Cecil Graham have different opinions about good women:

> LORD DARLINGTON: Oh! she doesn‘t love me. She is a good woman. She is the only good woman I have ever met in my life. [...]
> CECIL GRAHAM: Well, you are a lucky fellow! Why, I have met hundreds of good women. I never seem to meet any but good women. The world is perfectly packed with good women. To know them is a middle-class education.
> LORD DARLINGTON: This woman has purity and innocence. She has everything we men have lost.
> CECIL GRAHAM: My dear fellow, what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective (WILDE, 2003, p. 451-2).

Cecil Graham despises the characteristics Lord Darlington values, which are moral virtues. From Cecil Graham‘s point of view, they are useless characteristics, for they cannot be considered to embellish someone‘s appearance. He then concludes that a consciously calculated buttonhole is much more effective for men, due to the fact that he believes morality to be aesthetically useless. Purity and innocence are commonly regarded as inner beauty, for they are able to adorn the character of a person and, instead of being created, they are inborn qualities. However, Cecil Graham feels that something deliberately used to beautify one is much more efficient in terms of being recognised as attractive. Therefore, for Cecil Graham, artifice triumphs over nature, aesthetics triumphs over ethics, and utility lies in beauty.

Cecil Graham employs Wilde‘s arguments that nature, reality and morality are opposite to exaggeration and imagination, which is seen as capable of holding beauty:

> Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which [...] might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing. [...] He either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well informed. Both things are equally fatal to his imagination, as indeed they would be fatal to the imagination of anybody, and in a short time he develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truthtelling, begins to verify all statements made in his presence, has no hesitation in contradicting people who are much younger than himself, and often ends by writing novels which are so like life that no one can possibly believe in their probability. This is no isolated instance that we are giving. It is simply one example out of many; and if something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and Beauty will pass away from the land (WILDE, 2003, p. 1073-4)

Beauty, in its turn, is the quality that gives art its supremacy. For that reason, art must be connected to artifice through imagination. As Cecil Graham values the effectiveness of a carefully thought-out buttonhole in order to produce beauty, he shows that a developed aesthetic taste is superior to ethical principles.

Finally, in the last act of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, when Mrs Erlynne appears in the Windermeres‘ house to bid farewell to her daughter, Lord Windermere accuses her of behaving absurdly. As Lord Windermere initially thought that Mrs Erlynne had repented of her past and wanted to change her life, he gave her the opportunity to do so by spending large amounts of money to keep her in London. Nevertheless, when Lord Windermere meets Mrs Erlynne in Lord Darlington‘s house in the middle of the night, he assumes she is having a love affair with Lord Darlington, for Lord Darlington is single and she is caught alone in a bachelor‘s house at an inappropriate time. Lord

Windermere mistakenly concludes that Mrs Erlynne has been false to him, that she has not changed at all, and that she has not repented of her past. Therefore, Lord Windermere treats Mrs Erlynne the way he thinks she deserves to be treated:

> LORD WINDERMERE *(coming up to MRS ERLYNNE and speaking in a low voice)*: It is monstrous your intruding yourself here after your conduct last night.
> MRS ERLYNNE *(with an amused smile)*: My dear Windermere, manners before morals! (WILDE, 2003, p. 457).

Mrs Erlynne‘s answer is used to emphasise the fact that having good manners, in other words, sustaining a pose, is in her opinion more important than having high ethical principles. Refraining in order to maintain a peaceful environment is considered more significant than spreading moral views. Aesthetics is, once more, considered more important than ethics.

The same distinction between Aesthetics and Ethics can be seen in Wilde‘s third play, *A Woman of No Importance*, every time each character refers to morality as being equivalent to boring behaviour. They match ethics with a dull attitude towards life. The following dialogue, between Lady Stutfield and Lord Illingworth, in the first act, is the first example of the separation between aesthetics and ethics in this comedy:

> LADY STUTFIELD: The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: But what world says that, Lady Stutfield? It must be the next world. This world and I are on excellent terms. [...]
> LADY STUTFIELD: Every one I know says you are very, very wicked.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about, nowadays, saying things against one behind one‘s back that are absolutely and entirely true (WILDE, 2003, p. 469).

Lord Illingworth makes an inversion when he asserts that people tell the truth behind one‘s back. As talking about someone behind their back is considered to be deceitful, it is not expected that a person who has this habit would be professing the truth. As dishonest as the person is for not having the courage to talk straightforwardly to another one, he/she is likely to give untrustworthy information when talking about people in their absence. Nonetheless, Lord Illingworth reverses common sense as he affirms that the habit of speaking the truth about someone without their knowledge is grotesque. Lord Illingworth‘s reply to Lady Stutfield‘s comment reveals that he also inverts common sense by saying that people‘s manners are horrible because they speak the truth. Lord Illingworth is not criticising people‘s habit of talking behind someone‘s back, for he is indifferent to that. However, he is not indifferent to the fact that people

do not value an aesthetic pose. In Lord Illingworth‘s opinion, if people had at least the smallest notion of the importance of an aesthetic pose, they would never speak the truth behind someone‘s back. Hence, people would replace their ethical code with an aesthetic one, and, in order to maintain the pose, they would stop telling the truth. The artificiality of a pose is therefore considered imperative and should be regarded as enough to substitute truth.

In a dialogue between Lady Caroline and Lady Stutfield in the first act, Lady Caroline shows that she is influenced by Lord Illingworth‘s thoughts on immorality. Lady Caroline holds that one should not believe there is goodness in everyone in order not to be deceived. Her comments are ironic and hilarious:

> LADY CAROLINE: You believe good of every one, Jane. It is a great fault.
> LADY STUTFIELD: Do you really, really think, Lady Caroline, that one should believe evil of every one?
> LADY CAROLINE: I think it is much safer to do so, Lady Stutfield. Until, of course, people are found out to be good. But that requires a great deal of investigation nowadays.
> LADY STUTFIELD: But there is so much unkind scandal in modern life.
> LADY CAROLINE: Lord Illingworth remarked to me last night at dinner that the basis of every scandal is an absolutely immoral certainty (WILDE, 2003, p. 472).

Lady Caroline seems to believe that in society aesthetics has already replaced ethics, and, for that reason, no-one should trust those around him/her are good in ethical terms. When Lady Stutfield tries to argue that scandal may sometimes be unjustified, Lady Caroline mentions Lord Illingworth‘s words to support her position. Lord Illingworth, in the role of the dandy, argues that people in Victorian society base their judgment of other people on the fact that they consider themselves to be ethically superior and, because of that, people are certain of the immorality of others. Thus, whether a scandal is unfounded or not, makes no difference, for people who talk scandal are absolutely convinced of other people‘s immoral behaviour, and their beliefs are regarded as the basis which grounds dishonour and infamy.

In the first act, Mrs Allonby and Lord Illingworth talk about Miss Hester Worsley in a derisive manner, which reveals more about the speakers than about the person who is the object of their comments. Mrs Allonby shows she is insecure, for she is rather annoyed by the fact that Miss Hester Worsley is younger than she is. As Mrs Allonby values youth, she thinks that being younger is a proof of superiority. Lord Illingworth, in his turn, criticises the fact that Miss Hester is a Puritan. He cannot stand

a pretty young girl holding views so different from his own, which reveals he is extremely conceited and self-centred:

> MRS ALLONBY: […] I can‘t stand the American young lady.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: Why?
> MRS ALLONBY: She told me yesterday, and in quite a loud voice too, that she was only eighteen. It was most annoying. [...] She is a Puritan besides –
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: Ah, that is inexcusable. I don‘t mind plain women being Puritans. It is the only excuse they have for being plain. But she is decidedly pretty. I admire her immensely (WILDE, 2003, p. 475).

In Lord Illingworth‘s opinion, Miss Hester‘s ideas are antiquated and inappropriate for an attractive girl, for he associates morality with the lack of beauty. As Lord Illingworth declares he does not mind plain women being Puritans, he is substituting aesthetics by ethics. In his judgment, a woman should not spoil her beauty with morality, for ethics is exceedingly unbecoming.

Lord Illingworth shows that he is a steady character regarding his aesthetic principles, since throughout the play he makes comments that illustrate his belief that aesthetics is higher than ethics. In a dialogue with Mrs Allonby, Lord Illingworth is thankful for having never been considered a man with a good reputation, as if being regarded as a good person would be a demerit:

> LORD ILLINGWORTH: One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.
> MRS ALLONBY: Have you tried a good reputation?
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected (WILDE, 2003, p. 477).

A good reputation, in Lord Illingworth‘s opinion, would require a greater level of strength, for it would damage his aesthetic principles. In his view, an aesthete should not only split aesthetics and ethics, but also present an immoral attitude which would reveal his disregard for morality. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that an immoral attitude by itself is not enough to prove one is aesthetically concerned. Aestheticism is supposed to be accompanied by immorality, but immorality without any conception of beauty is ineffective.

In Act Three, Lord Illingworth has a conversation with Gerald Arbuthnot _from father to son‘. Although Lord Illingworth is not completely prepared to take on the role of a father, he talks to Gerald and gives him some pieces of advice. In the beginning, Lord Illingworth talks about Gerald‘s missing the figure of a father, adding that Mrs Arbuthnot has limited views of life, which prevents Gerald from widening his horizons.

Lord Illingworth also advises Gerald on the way he should behave in society and towards women, explaining to Gerald the philosopher‘s view on women and men: _to the philosopher, my dear Gerald, women represent the triumph of matter over mind – just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 494). The triumph of matter over mind may be regarded as the inversion of the common idea that willpower can overcome physical obstacles. Therefore, if women represent the triumph of matter over mind, they represent the irrational, that is, all that is inconsistent with reason. Lord Illingworth‘s description fits Mrs Arbuthnot‘s behaviour, for her motives for maintaining hatred for Lord Illingworth in her heart after twenty years seem really unreasonable. Furthermore, Mrs Arbuthnot‘s morality was not overcome by her reason; therefore, in Lord Illingworth‘s point of view, she seems irrational because she was not capable of extricating herself from the set of principles that rules Victorian society. Lord Illingworth continues his explanation to Gerald and tells his son that men represent the triumph of mind over morals, which may be considered as the ability of the intellect to overcome principles. As principles are grounded in tradition, they can be defeated according to one‘s perception. As beauty is a quality that pleases the senses, which are perceived in the mind, the triumph of mind over morals would be the triumph of aesthetics over ethics.

In the third act of *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth makes his sharp comments, to which Lady Hunstanton comments that he sounds excessively immoral. Lord Illingworth answers Lady Hunstanton‘s comment by saying that _All thought is immoral. Its very essence is destruction. If you think of anything, you kill it. Nothing survives being thought of‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 497-8). By saying that all thoughts are immoral, Lord Illingworth echoes Gilbert in _The Critic as Artist‘, when Gilbert states that _[…] all the arts are immoral, except those baser forms of sensual or didactic art that seek to excite to action of evil or of good. For action of every kind belongs to the sphere of ethics. The aim of art is simply to create a mood‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1139). Whereas Lord Illingworth talks about thought, Gilbert talks about the arts, but the fact is that the arts are conceived in the mind before they are created. Thus, it is possible to see that, in the comedies, Wilde uses the very same ideas he employed to conceive his aesthetic criticism. Wilde‘s plays and his critical essays are based on the same aesthetic ideas.

In the first act, Lord Illingworth becomes involved in a discussion about politics with Mr Kelvil. As both men have totally opposite perspectives, they completely

disagree with each other. Lord Illingworth maintains an immoral position and claims that politics cannot change the nature of people, whereas Mr Kelvil thinks that Parliament has been useful in supporting the disfavoured:

> LORD ILLINGWORTH: One should never take sides in anything, Mr Kelvil. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore. However, the House of Commons really does very little harm. You can‘t make people good by Act of Parliament, – that is something.
> KELVIL: You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathise with the joy, the beauty, the colour of life. The less said about life‘s sores the better, Mr Kelvil (WILDE, 2003, p. 471).

According to Lord Illingworth, one should focus on positive things rather than on the suffering of the poor. Lord Illingworth‘s words are reminiscent of Gilbert‘s comments in ‗The Critic as Artist‘, when proposes that aesthetics are superior to ethics. Gilbert clarifies his point of view by adding that ‗[t]o discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1154). As Lord Illingworth states that one should sympathise with joy and beauty and colour, he is considering that a colour-sense is in fact more important than a sense of right and wrong. He is the personification of the aesthetic philosopher, and through him it is possible to realise that Wilde conceived a comic character who embodies all his theoretical ideas about Aestheticism.

Wilde‘s vigorous defence of the separation between aesthetics and ethics is also present in his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There are several references to immorality and to the superiority of beauty in relation to morals. This is one of the aesthetic principles most emphasised in the play. When Gwendolen asserts, ‗In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 55), she is defending the truth of this aesthetic principle. If style, which is related to the unity of art and it is also connected with aesthetics, is more important than truth – which belongs to the territory of morality and ethics –, then style surpasses truth and aesthetics surpasses ethics.

The characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* constantly defend immorality, and one instance of this can be seen in the first act, when Algernon presses John for a reasonable explanation involving his cigarette case and the inscription inside

of it. John produces a satisfactory explanation, but Algernon disagrees with him on his last comment:

> JACK: My dear Algy, I don‘t know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It‘s one‘s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one‘s health or one‘s happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.
> ALGERNON: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility! (WILDE, 1994, p. 12-13).

When Jack affirms that a high moral tone does not contribute either to health or happiness, he is revealing that he thinks that a high moral tone, or an ethical code of behaviour, is a boring attitude towards life, and does not correspond to his main objective, for he intends to live a life of pleasure, based on aesthetic principles. It is the life a dandy is supposed to live. As it was mentioned, Jack fails as a dandy, for he does not hold aesthetic values as intrinsically as Algernon does. Nonetheless, he still tries to do so, and when he incorporates the identity of his fake brother Ernest, it is as if he was able to free himself from his own ethical principles, which are dominant.

Algernon goes on to explain to John that he has also created an imaginary person, his invalid friend Bunbury, who allows him to escape from his social obligations. On account of his visit to Bunbury, Algernon intends to evade his commitment to have dinner at his Aunt Augusta‘s house and tells John they are going to have dinner together in a restaurant. As John disapproves of his attitude, Algernon opposes his arguments and comments on the inverse relationship between morality and beauty:

> JACK: You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.
> ALGERNON: I haven‘t the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one‘s own relations. In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the third place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, to-night. She will place me next to Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent ... and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one‘s clean linen in public (WILDE, 1994, p. 13-4).

Algernon‘s comment embodies the inversion of principles he favours: aesthetics is higher than ethics and, for Algernon, aesthetics is able to replace ethics. Therefore, when he analyses the morally correct attitude of wives who flirt with their husbands, in public, in aesthetic terms – ‗It looks so bad‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 13-4), he says –, he shows he believes that the right pose is more important than a sense of right and wrong.

Another remarkable point is that Algernon is not an immoral character. He is rather an amoral one, for his notion of morality does not even exist; he has completely replaced ethics with aesthetics. As John tells Algernon that he intends to part with his fake brother Ernest if Gwendolen accepts his proposal, John also advises Algernon to do the same, to which he answers that:

> ALGERNON: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.
> JACK: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won‘t want to know Bunbury.
> ALGERNON: Then your wife will. You don‘t seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none (WILDE, 1994, p.14).

By saying that married life is tedious when lived by the couple alone, Algernon suggests that what makes married life amusing is the possibility of having extramarital affairs. John disagrees with Algernon, for he thinks that a charming girl like Gwendolen will never make him feel bored enough to look for extramarital amusements. Nonetheless, Algernon defeats John‘s argument by saying that, even if John does not want to have the company of other women, his wife will want to have the company of other men, suggesting that it is impossible for the couple to be amused in each other‘s company. Algernon sounds sententious and resigned, as if reality was extremely different from what is preached by Victorian principles. As he concludes his speech, Algernon reveals that his notion of ethics is completely different from that of Victorian society. Being amoral, Algernon does not base his thoughts and beliefs on ethical principles, but rather on his perception of society.

As may be observed, in order to separate aesthetics and ethics, Wilde tries to soften the moral sense of his audience. Wilde does so using two artifices: laughter and sympathy. The first artifice used by Wilde, that is, laughter, is employed in his first and second tragedies, namely *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*. In both tragedies, the most immoral and cruel characters are also the most ironic and funniest ones. Such is the case of Prince Paul in *Vera, or The Nihilists* and Simone Gesso in *The*

Duchess of Padua. In the tragedies, the comedy that is related to immorality is introduced gradually, since there must be restraints on laughter in a tragedy. As a result, laughter is seen as a powerful weapon, since it is through it that the audience is amused by content, which, if spoken in a serious manner, would be considered tragic and absurd.

In the comedies, Wilde relates comedy to immorality in a deeper way, for the texts of these plays are already supposed to provoke laughter, and Wilde‘s purpose is to entertain the audience. Nevertheless, while Wilde entertains his audience, he inserts immoral elements so that the audience drop their guard and begin to laugh at themselves. As they laugh at their own moral strictness, the audience treat it more trivially. This kind of artifice is well employed in all Wilde‘s comedies, mainly through the figure of the dandy, which is the character whose speech is recurrently marked by the game between triviality and seriousness. As a result, the game between serious and trivial also denotes a battle between moral and immoral, in which values are inverted through laughter and Wilde succeeds in amusing the audience with what was theretofore considered serious.

The second artifice, which is characterised by the use of sympathy, is well employed by Wilde. The characters ‗with a past‘ appear on the scenes to show to the audience their perspective of their past, which forces the audience to view the characters‘ situation in proper perspective, analysing it with empathy. Wilde masters the ability to make the audience identify with the characters‘ feelings, especially in the case of Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, and even Sir Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*.

Wilde also makes a distinction between aesthetics and ethics by means of the opposition of morality to other Victorian values, such as pride, self love and marriage. It happens both in *A Woman of No Importance* and in *An Ideal Husband*. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs Arbuthnot has her morality confronted with her hatred for Lord Illingworth. Nonetheless, her self-love and pride are more significant to her than her moral sense, which impels her to reject the suggestion of her son, Gerald, that she should get married to Lord Illingworth in order to become respectable. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Gertrude Chiltern sees her strict moral sense coming up against the love she feels for her husband. In her case, however, marriage bonds are more important than morality, and she ends up with Sir Robert Chiltern.

5.2 Contradiction: the non-existence of a universal truth

At the end of _The Truth of Masks', when Wilde published the text in *Intentions*, he added a paragraph which the text did not have when it was published for the first time in *The Nineteenth Century*, in 1885. In the added paragraph, Wilde proposes a new perception to the text he had published previously. Some critics say that between the first publication of the text and its reprinting in *Intentions*, Wilde had changed his mind regarding some of the ideas established in _The Truth of Masks'. Whether Wilde had changed his mind regarding Shakespearean theatre (the main subject of the essay) or not, the most important point in the added paragraph is that Wilde supports the idea that there is no single, universal truth in terms of art. From Wilde's perspective, truth can be varied and contradictory, for it is only a standpoint:

> [n]ot that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in æsthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks (WILDE, 2003, p.1173).

From this perspective, it is possible to have a deeper comprehension of Wilde's often contradictory ideas. Moreover, an understanding of the Wildean system of contraries[13] enables his readers and critics to obtain a further understanding of his use of figures of speech and stylistic devices, such as irony, oxymoron, paradox and epigram, for they all present some degree of contradiction.

However, it is necessary to clarify that allowing the comprehension of the existence of contradiction does not necessarily mean allowing every possible perspective to be considered true. The fact that Wilde affirms that _a Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true' does not allow critics to understand that everything in art is true. A truth in art must fulfil some prerequisites, which Wilde clarifies in his other essays, _The Critic as Artist' and _The Truth of Masks'.

In _The Decay of Lying', through the character Vivian, Wilde states that _[...] Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1081), which elucidates that the combination of distinctive features of artistic expression redounds to

[13] It is important to bear in mind that, for Wilde, acquiring knowledge implies changing what one learns. Therefore, Hegel's system of contraries becomes Wildean in Wilde's hands.

furnish art with veracity. Therefore, in order to be considered truth, any artistic expression has to be provided with typical characteristics of the artist.

In ‗The Critic as Artist', through Gilbert, Wilde goes further in his ideas about truth and declares that ‗Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1142), which reveals that, for Wilde, a truth will not only bear the artist's style, but it will also be covered with subterfuges that will distract readers, spectators and critics. Furthermore, Wilde adds that ‗[t]o know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1143), which shows that a truth in art is supposed to express a particular state of mind of the artist; hence, truths in art are also connected with emotion.

A truth in art must fulfil all the mentioned conditions to be considered true, that is, a truth in art has to carry the artist's singular way of expression as well as his disposition and it has to appear covered by disguise. Only if a truth encompasses all these characteristics will its contradiction also be true. Once all these requirements are met, Wilde adopts a conception of truth as contradiction and for him, opposites can only be understood together.

As in his plays Wilde uses figures of speech and stylistic devices to state his aesthetic ideas as well as to criticise society, showing that his wit allowed him to disguise his ideas with a cover of entertainment, there are many instances of contradictory truths in his plays. In his first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, there is Wilde's first allusion to contradiction and the non-existence of a universal truth, when Prince Paul states:

> COUNT ROUVALOFF: There seems to be nothing in life about which you would not jest.
> PRINCE PAUL: Ah! my dear Count, life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it (WILDE, 2003, p. 698).

Prince Paul's statement refers to the binary opposition between ‗serious' and ‗trivial' which appears again in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, through Lord Darlington's speech: ‗LADY WINDERMERE: Why do you *talk* so trivially about life, then? / LORD DARLINGTON: Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it (WILDE, 2003, p. 425). According to Lord Darlington's perspective, serious and trivial are inverted concepts, which may cause him to sound contradictory. Actually, the conflict between these concepts permeates Wilde's entire dramatic works,

culminating with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whose subtitle was ‗A Trivial Comedy for Serious People'. In fact, Wilde plays with the concepts of seriousness and triviality, sometimes inverting them, so as to prove that they are closely related, although they seem different. Using the concepts as if they were interchangeable, Wilde keeps his mask, and avoids having his intention been completely apprehended.

In fact, the play with the concepts of seriousness and triviality is not the only device Wilde uses to avoid been considered intelligible. Every time a character states something that may sound absurd, he/she is supporting a point of view, which is, actually, a view from a certain point. In *Vera, or The Nihilists*, each time Prince Paul makes absurd assertions, he is suggesting there is no such a thing as a universal truth. When Prince Paul joins the Nihilists and he gives his reasons for doing so, ‗As I cannot be Prime Minister, I must be a Nihilist. There is no alternative' (WILDE, 2003, p. 709), he appears to sound absurd, for being a Prime Minister in the kingdom of the Czar is absolutely the opposite of being a Nihilist. As Prince Paul changes sides so fast, he is considered absurd, although he is once more defending his point of view, which has an internal logic: he must be in power, regardless of the side he is on.

Prince Paul sounds absurd once more when he states that he was disappointed with the result of his joining the Nihilists. Based on his belief that to lose one's head for political reasons is a very romantic act, for it shows idealistic views about death, Prince Paul comments on the actions of the Nihilists:

> MICHAEL: [...] Two Emperors in one week. That will make the balance straight. We would have thrown in a Prime Minister if you had not come.
> PRINCE PAUL: Ah, I am sorry you told me. It robs my visit of all its picturesqueness and adventure. I thought I was perilling my head by coming here, and you tell me I have saved it. One is sure to be disappointed if one tries to get romance out of modern life (WILDE, 2003, p. 710).

The fact that Prince Paul asserts he is disappointed at not having lost his head sounds absurd, but if we consider his perspective – he was a traitor who was saved for joining the opposition –, his thoughts have their own logic.

In Wilde's third tragedy, *Salomé*, each character has his or her own truth and all of them coexist. Salomé has her own truth, which is different from that of Herodias. Herod prefers to believe in his own version of the truth, while Jokanaan beholds Christ's verity.

When Herod distorts Jokanaan‘s prophecies to make them fit his beliefs, he presents his own version of the truth. As Herodias points out that the prophet does not reveal the divine inspiration only against her, Herod does not accept it:

> HERODIAS: You hear what he says about you. He says you will be eaten of worms.
> HEROD: It is not of me that he speaks. He speaks never against me. It is of the King of Cappadocia that he speaks; the King of Cappadocia who is mine enemy. It is he who shall be eaten of worms. It is not I. Never has he spoken word against me, this prophet, save that I sinned in taking to wife the wife of my brother. It may be he is right. For, of a truth, you are sterile.
> HERODIAS: I am sterile, I? You say that, you that are ever looking at my daughter, you that would have her dance for your pleasure? It is absurd to say that. I have borne a child. You have gotten no child, no, not even from one of your slaves. It is you who are sterile, not I.
> HEROD: Peace, woman! I say that you are sterile. You have borne me no child, and the prophet says that our marriage is not a true marriage. He says that it is an incestuous marriage, a marriage that will bring evils... I fear he is right; I am sure that he is right (WILDE, 2003, p. 598).

Herod‘s truth is convenient for him, as it assures him that he does not need to fear Jokanaan‘s prophecies. As Herod accuses Herodias of being sterile, she proves to him that she cannot be considered sterile, for Salomé is the proof she is able to bear a child, but even when he listens to the truth, Herod is not convinced. He prefers to believe in his interpretation of Jokanaan‘s prophecies. Moreover, he acts as if his words carry the weight of truth, for he is a sovereign and cannot be contradicted. He happily believes that his power is enough to adapt reality.

Herodias, in her turn, believes that she has influenced Salomé to revenge her by asking for Jokanaan‘s head. As Salomé asks for Jokanaan‘s head in exchange for having danced for the Tetrarch, Herodias is convinced that her daughter has made her decision based on the love she feels for her mother, and not because of the obsession she has for the prophet:

> HERODIAS: My daughter has done well to ask the head of Jokanaan. He has covered me with insults. He has said monstrous things against me. One can see that she loves her mother well. Do not yield, my daughter. He has sworn, he has sworn (WILDE, 2003, p. 601).

Even though Salomé claims she is following her own heart rather than her mother‘s advice, Herodias deceives herself for she wants to believe that Salomé has done it for her. Like Herod, Herodias feels in a more comfortable position when she adapts reality to fit her wishes. She is not courageous enough to face the truth, so she distorts it.

Jokanaan, in his turn, respects Christ‘s truth and has it as his own. He professes Christ‘s truth clearly and distinctly, without fear of being persecuted by confessing a faith that is not shared by everyone in Babylon:

> THE VOICE OF JOKANAAN: After me shall come another mightier than I. I am not worthy so much as to unloose the latchet of his shoes. When he cometh, the solitary places shall be glad. They shall blossom like the lily. The eyes of the blind shall see the day, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened. The new-born child shall put his hand upon the dragon's lair, he shall lead the lions by their manes (WILDE, 2003, p. 584).

Jokanaan announces the coming of the Messiah, explaining that when the Messiah comes, wonderful changes are going to happen. Jokanaan also urges everybody to repent, saying that people should be ready for the coming of Christ in order to be saved from sin. As he keeps accusing Herodias of living a life full of lust, and prophesising that she will be punished for such sinful behaviour, his prophecies have resulted in his imprisonment, but prison was not sufficient to keep him quiet. Even from inside the cistern, he calls out in the name of the Lord, which makes Salomé hear his voice and become fascinated by it. Jokanaan‘s faith is so truthful for him, that he is willing to die for it.

Finally, Salomé also has her own version of the truth, one that only she can observe. She explains her actions to herself, in order to justify her right to ask for Jokanaan‘s head. Salomé‘s truth is her own perspective of the facts involving her first contact with Jokanaan until his death:

> SALOMÉ: I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire... Ah! ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me, Jokanaan? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me. Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me, and the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death. Love only should one consider (WILDE, 2003, p. 604).

Salomé‘s explanation for her fury against Jokannan does not sound reasonable, for she blames him for her own acts of madness. Her arguments make her sound like a spoiled girl who, refusing to accept reality, has decided to destroy it. She does not accept the fact that Jokanaan despised her and she convinces herself that he would have loved her if he had looked at her, trying to create an idealistic reality that could never happen.

Therefore, in *Salomé*, each of the main characters perceives reality according to a personal vision, which is marked by fear, faith, or noncompliance. None of them presents a version of reality that may be said to correspond to reality, for even

Jokanaan‘s prophecies are about the future, and cannot be said to be true at the moment when he is uttering them.

In Wilde‘s first comedy, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, there are so many contradictions that they all stand as a truth from different perspectives. When Lord Darlington tells Lady Windermere at the beginning of the first act that he ‗can resist everything except temptation‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 424), he seems contradictory, but in his perspective, he is only following his desires – he is a slave of his own wishes, which makes his statement logical if analysed in that light.

It is remarkable that the example of contradiction mentioned above is not illogical or inconsistent in terms of signification, but rather on the linguistic level. It can be observed that, in this instance of contradiction, linguistic consistency is annulled, but the logic of meaning remains. When Lord Darlington says that he ‗can resist everything except temptation‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 424), he is saying that he cannot resist anything. If Wilde had chosen to make him say ‗I resist nothing‘, Lord Darlington‘s speech would have lost its stylistic feature. Contradiction in Lord Darlington‘s statement is, therefore, a matter of style, rather than a problem of inconsistency in its content. Contradiction is thus related to style and Wilde‘s way of organising language, which is highly aesthetic, for the reason that form is being explored. As Wilde wrote in ‗The Critic as Artist‘,

> [i]n every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things. [...] Form is everything. It is the secret of life. [...] And so, to return to the sphere of Art, it is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under their conditions of beauty. Start with the worship of form, and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you (WILDE, 2003, p. 1148-9)

If form is responsible for creating the critical temperament as well as the aesthetic instinct, then it is also responsible for the formation of the beauty that can be found in an artistic work. Hence, contradiction in Wilde‘s plays is not merely a question of perspective, but, above all, a subject of beauty, for it lends exquisiteness to the artistic work.

The Duchess of Berwick comes to the Windermeres‘ house in the first act only to tell Lady Windermere that her husband may be having an affair with Mrs Erlynne. The Duchess tells Lady Windermere that the Duchess‘ nieces have seen Lord Windermere paying visits to Mrs Erlynne several times. The Duchess assures Lady Windermere that her nieces do not talk gossip, as if to provide veracity for her words:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: My dear [...] they tell me that Windermere goes there four and five times a week – they *see* him. They can‘t help it – and although they never talk scandal, they – well, of course – they remark on it to every one (WILDE, 2003, p. 426).

Nonetheless, when the Duchess of Berwick comes to Lady Windermere‘s party at night and discovers that Lady Windermere has invited Mrs Erlynne, in spite of all the information Lady Windermere has about her husband‘s affair with that woman, the Duchess changes her discourse and states that her nieces are always talking gossip and scandal and cannot be trusted:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Dear Margaret, I‘ve just been having such a delightful chat with Mrs Erlynne. I am so sorry for what I said to you this afternoon about her. Of course, she must be all right if *you* invite her. A most attractive woman, and has such sensible views on life. Told me she entirely disapproved of people marrying more than once, so I feel quite safe about poor Augustus. Can‘t imagine why people speak against her. It‘s those horrid nieces of mine – the Saville girls – they're always talking scandal (WILDE, 2003, p. 440).

As the Duchess of Berwick changes her speech to adjust it to Lady Windermere‘s attitudes, she is being contradictory to herself, but truthful to Lady Windermere‘s behaviour. As the Duchess considers that Lady Windermere is a person capable of judging those who deserve to be invited to her house, she concludes that the information she has given Lady Windermere was gossip her nieces were spreading. Moreover, Mrs Erlynne, with all her charm and ability to entertain, is able to delight the Duchess, making her change her mind about the woman she considered a villain.

Dumby is another character who contradicts himself all the time in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Dumby is always trying to make his speech appropriate for his listeners, as to please and be accepted by them:

> DUMBY: Good evening, Lady Stutfield. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?
> LADY STUTFIELD: I suppose so, Mr Dumby. It's been a delightful season, hasn't it?
> DUMBY: Quite delightful! Good evening, Duchess. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?
> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: I suppose so, Mr Dumby. It has been a very dull season, hasn't it?
> DUMBY: Dreadfully dull! Dreadfully dull!
> MR. COWPER-COWPER: Good evening, Mr Dumby. I suppose this will be the last ball of the season?
> DUMBY: Oh, I think not. There'll probably be two more (WILDE, 2003, p. 432-3).

Dumby seems contradictory, but he contradicts himself because his aim is to agree with people and not necessarily say what he thinks about the London season. By doing so, he

is able to entertain people since he sounds kind and amiable, which makes him suitable in Victorian society circles.

The audience discovers that Dumby and Lady Plimdale have a love relationship, and she may be considered the perfect match for him, as she also changes her speech according to the situation. When Dumby and Lady Plimdale are both at Lady Windermere‘s party, Lady Plimdale asks Dumby who Mrs Erlynne is, for she does not recognise the ‗well-dressed woman talking to Windermere‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 437). Although Dumby knows Mrs Erlynne, he alleges that he does not have the slightest idea, for he knows that Lady Plimdale is extremely jealous of him. Mrs Erlynne, knowing of Lady Plimdale‘s jealousy, teases her by talking to Dumby and inviting him to have lunch with her. Lady Plimdale is infuriated about being deceived, but as soon as she discovers that her ‗adversary‘ is Mrs Erlynne, she exclaims:

> LADY PLYMDALE: How very interesting! How intensely interesting! I really must have a good stare at her. *(Goes to door of ball-room and looks in)* I have heard the most shocking things about her. [...] You are to lunch there on Friday!
> DUMBY: Why?
> LADY PLYMDALE: Because I want you to take my husband with you. He has been so attentive lately, that he has become a perfect nuisance. Now, this woman is just the thing for him. He‘ll dance attendance upon her as long as she lets him, and won‘t bother me. I assure you, women of that kind are most useful. They form the basis of other people‘s marriages (WILDE, 2003, p.438).

When Lady Plimdale discovers that the beautiful woman she has just met is Mrs Erlynne, she is not angry at Dumby for lying to her any more, because she is now focused on making her own husband meet Mrs Erlynne. As she judges that her husband is capable of having an extramarital affair with a charming woman, she considers that Mrs Erlynne could be that woman. If her husband is occupied with Mrs Erlynne, he will not bother Lady Plimdale, who will be free to pursue Dumby. Lady Plimdale‘s behaviour is immoral, which seems contradictory, although it presents its own logic. Moreover, the motivation for the change in Lady Plimdale‘s behaviour is also used to denounce the hypocrisy of Victorian society.

Cecil Graham is one of the characters who, along with Lord Darlington and Dumby, play the role of the dandy. Because of that, his speech is full of contradictions, which makes it ironic and amusing. When he arrives at the Windermeres‘ house for Lady Windermere‘s birthday party, he reveals some of the theories he considers to be true:

> CECIL GRAHAM [...]: Good evening, Arthur. Why don't you ask me how I am? I like people to ask me how I am. It shows a wide-spread interest in my health. Now, to-night I am not at all well. Been dining with my people. Wonder why it is one's people are always so tedious? My father would talk morality after dinner. I told him he was old enough to know better. But my experience is that as soon as people are old enough to know better, they don't know anything at all (WILDE, 2003, p. 435).

As Cecil tells Lord Windermere that he likes being asked about his health, his vanity is exposed. However, as he keeps talking and does not allow anyone to interrupt him in order to ask how he is, he shows that, in fact, he prefers talking to listening. He then adds that he is not well because he had been dining with his family, which he considers tedious, revealing that, for him, family is an obligation rather than a gathering of people who, besides having blood relationship, love each other. As Cecil affirms his father was supposed to be wise enough not to talk morality, he shows that he disdains morality and dissociates it from wisdom and experience. He concludes his small speech by saying that age does not contribute to people‘s experience, revealing he is conceited enough to believe that, even in his youth, he may be said to be wiser than his father, for his perceptions are true, whereas his father‘s perceptions about morality and wisdom are seen as old-fashioned. It seems as if Cecil Graham is very experienced, and he really poses in that way, for, as a dandy, he feels it shows his superiority.

In Act Three, when all the men are gathered in Lord Darlington‘s house, Dumby and Cecil Graham treat Lord Augustus with sarcasm, as if they were superior to him. They act as if their perspectives were the only truthful ones:

> LORD AUGUSTUS: My dear boy, if I wasn't the most good-natured man in London –
> CECIL GRAHAM: We'd treat you with more respect, wouldn't we, Tuppy? [...]
> DUMBY: The youth of the present day are quite monstrous. They have absolutely no respect for dyed hair (WILDE, 2003, p. 450).

Both Cecil Graham and Dumby had been joking about Lord Augustus before, which made him say that, if it was not for his good nature, he would probably get angry with them both. Nonetheless, Cecil does not even allow Lord Augustus to complete his sentence, saying that they would probably treat him with more respect if he was angrier, mostly due to their fear rather than to real respect. Although they perceive in Lord Augustus‘ line a slight tone of disapproval for their disrespect towards him, Dumby does not care about it, being even more disrespectful when he states sarcastically that youth does not respect elderly people, mainly because old people dye their hair to hide

their age. Dumby sounds as if he is trying to justify youth‘s disrespect based on the attitudes of the old. As the elderly do not behave appropriately for their age, since they do not wish to acknowledge that they are old, youth also does not behave adequately and politely towards them.

Cecil Graham also talks about the determination of women to try to change men, saying how contradictory it seems, for they are firstly attracted by bad men and, after some time, they want to change them into good ones:

> CECIL GRAHAM: That is the worst of women. They always want one to be good. And if we are good, when they meet us, they don‘t love us at all. They like to find us quite irretrievably bad, and to leave us quite unattractively good (WILDE, 2003, p. 451).

In fact, what Cecil Graham is talking about is the fact that even the most respectable women are attracted by wickedness, but they do not want their husband to continue being wicked after marriage, for they are afraid of being cheated on. Therefore, they try to change their nature and, when women have reached their goal in changing their partners, their husbands become unattractive even to their eyes.

In the same scene, in Lord Darlington‘s house, when Lord Darlington asserts he is in love with a woman who does not reciprocate his feelings, Dumby states he has never been able to find a woman who disliked him. Although he sounds extremely conceited, he explains his reasons for saying that, which sound even more contradictory:

> DUMBY: She doesn‘t really love you then?
> LORD DARLINGTON: No, she does not!
> DUMBY: I congratulate you, my dear fellow. [...] How long could you love a woman who didn‘t love you, Cecil?
> CECIL GRAHAM: A woman who didn‘t love me? Oh, all my life!
> DUMBY: So could I. But it‘s so difficult to meet one.
> LORD DARLINGTON: How can you be so conceited, Dumby?
> DUMBY: I didn‘t say it as a matter of conceit. I said it as a matter of regret. I have been wildly, madly adored. I am sorry I have. It has been an immense nuisance. I should like to be allowed a little time to myself now and then (WILDE, 2003, p. 452).

Dumby feels annoyed at being adored, as if he would like to be despised. In fact, his position has its own logic, for being always treasured by women makes him feel that he really is superior to them, and if he could find a woman who despised him, he would feel that he had found a woman who is on the same level as himself.

In the same scene, Cecil Graham scorns Lord Augustus to Lord Darlington. As Cecil comments on experience, he sounds absurd, for he claims that even being young, he is far too experienced:

> LORD DARLINGTON: You always amuse me, Cecil. You talk as if you were a man of experience.
> CECIL GRAHAM: I am. [...]
> LORD DARLINGTON: You are far too young!
> CECIL GRAHAM: That is a great error. Experience is a question of instinct about life. I have got it. Tuppy hasn't. Experience is the name Tuppy gives to his mistakes. That is all.
> *LORD AUGUSTUS looks round indignantly.*
> DUMBY: Experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes (WILDE, 2003, p. 452-3).

When Dumby makes the inversion about experience saying that it is rather a matter of instinct than of learning, he sounds illogical. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that, as Pater proposes it, experience is constituted by the way one apprehends the external world in his/her inner beings. Dumby is, therefore, expressing Pater's point of view. From Pater's and Dumby's point of view, experience comes as a natural feeling in relation to life. Therefore, Dumby is truthful according to his own perspective.

In *An Ideal Husband*, three characters are particularly contradictory: Lord Arthur Goring, Miss Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley. All of them use witticisms, paradoxes and epigrams for their own amusement, sounding illogical and contradictory, as we can see in the following extract:

> MRS CHEVELEY: Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analysed, women … merely adored.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?
> MRS CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.
> MRS CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do (WILDE, 2003, p. 519-20).

Mrs Cheveley equates aesthetics to illogicality, for the preoccupation of the dandy with clothes is a distinct characteristic of the aesthetic philosopher. It seems quite absurd to say that aesthetics is illogical, but if it is considered that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that Wilde does not define beauty in precise terms, aesthetics becomes really unscientific.

Miss Mabel Chiltern also seems contradictory when she makes a remarkable comment on the constitution of London society, when she is talking to Lord Caversham

at the beginning of the first act: _Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 517). When Miss Mabel Chiltern asserts that London Society has improved immensely, we expect her to praise it, and not tell Lord Caversham that it is composed of idiots and lunatics. Nonetheless, her position has coherence if we focus on the fact that she is a dandy, and as such, she wants to be considered superior. Thus, if there were only clever people in society, she would not be as much in evidence as she is.

When Lord Arthur Goring arrives at the Chilterns‘ house, he meets Miss Mabel Chiltern, who accuses him of being selfish, for he tells her that he would have taken longer to arrive if he had known he was being missed by her. Lord Goring agrees with Miss Mabel Chiltern‘s accusation, and admits he is indeed very selfish. Miss Mabel Chiltern then comments that he keeps telling her of his bad qualities, to which he answers:

> LORD GORING: I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel!
> MABEL CHILTERN: Are the others very bad?
> LORD GORING: Quite dreadful! When I think of them at night I go to sleep at once (WILDE, 2003, p. 522).

It is quite ironic that his bad qualities bore him to the point of going to sleep immediately. It reveals that Lord Goring is absolutely unconcerned about them. As a wicked dandy, his position also has its own coherence, for it is true that a wicked dandy should not be disturbed by his bad qualities. Actually, he seems even proud of them, as if they were a sign of his disdain for moral values.

5.3 Non-utilitarian Art

Aestheticism was an artistic movement which presented as one of its principles the denial of the necessity of utilitarianism. Artistic value should reside in beauty, and artistic works were not supposed to hold didactic or utilitarian functions. In his essays _The Decay of Lying‘ and _The Critic as Artist‘, Wilde refers to the non-usefulness of art. For him, art is superior to everything, and, due to its superiority, it can be considered above matters of usefulness. From this perspective, art‘s main purpose is retained within itself – _Art for Art‘s sake‘, in the words of the philosophers of the Aesthetic Movement.

In _The Critic as Artist‘, through the character Gilbert, Wilde makes the following consideration about utilitarianism in art: _Don‘t degrade me into the position of giving you useful information. Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1114). Gilbert can be considered the equivalent of Lord Arthur Goring, for the latter is also an aesthetic philosopher and stands for its principles. Thus, like Gilbert, he does not agree with utilitarianism in art. When asked by his father, Lord Caversham, why he does not try to do something useful in his life, Lord Goring claims he is too young for that. As Lord Caversham points out that he hates the affectation of youth, Lord Goring explains to him that _Youth isn‘t an affectation. Youth is an art‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 570). Considering that for Lord Goring youth is an art, his life is seen as an art. That is why he cannot do something useful in life. If he did, he would be spoiling art‘s purpose.

In _The Critic as Artist‘, Oscar Wilde sets out his own non-utilitarian theory, that is, his personal view of it through the dialogue between Gilbert and Ernest. As they are talking about action and its utility:

> GILBERT: […] while, in the opinion of society, Contemplation is the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty, in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man.
> ERNEST: Contemplation?
> GILBERT: Contemplation. I said to you some time ago that it was far more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it. Let me say to you now that to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual. [...] It was to this that the passion for holiness led the saint and the mystic of mediaeval days.
> ERNEST: We exist, then, to do nothing?
> GILBERT: It is to do nothing that the elect exist. Action is limited and relative. Unlimited and absolute is the vision of him who sits at ease and watches, who walks in loneliness and dreams. But we who are born at the close of this wonderful age are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life in exchange for life itself (WILDE, 2003, p. 1136).

Wilde once more prints his trademark in establishing the concept of non-utilitarianism. For him, non-utilitarianism is rather a matter of having pleasure while exercising contemplation, than of having no purpose. Contemplation is the act of looking attentively and thoughtfully, and Wilde considers it to be unlimited and absolute, for it provides the beholder with a deep and integrated vision that he/she would not have otherwise. An instance of Wilde‘s non-utilitarian theory is given when both Algernon and John decide to do nothing after dinner, almost at the end of the first act:

> ALGERNON: What shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?
> JACK: Oh no! I loathe listening.
> ALGERNON: Well, let us go to the Club?
> JACK: Oh, no! I hate talking.
> ALGERNON: Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?
> JACK: Oh, no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly.
> ALGERNON: Well, what shall we do?
> JACK: Nothing!
> ALGERNON: It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind (WILDE, 1994, p. 25).

Wilde's non-utilitarian theory is glimpsed through the dialogue between Algernon and John, for Algernon proposes a set of different things for them to do, and John refuses to do any of them. As John is not in the mood for doing anything, he tells Algernon that they should do nothing, which is something that Algernon, like Gilbert, considers to be really hard. Algernon clarifies that he does not mind doing the most difficult thing, that is, nothing, only if there is no purpose attached to their "non-activity". Algernon's comment shows that, as long as there is any kind of utility in doing nothing, the "non-activity" loses its purpose. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that non-utilitarianism should privilege the pleasure of contemplation, instead of having another purpose.

5.4 The Dandy: The Most Important Character in Wilde's Dramatic Works

The "dandy" is a character who appears predominantly in Wilde's comedies, although there are instances of characters who behave like dandies in the tragedies as well. In fact, during the Victorian period, the dandy was a relatively common character in the works of Decadent writers; but, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word comes from a prior age.

The Oxford English Dictionary states that "dandy" is a noun of unknown origin which came into use at the end of the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, from about 1813 to 1819, this word was in vogue in London. The term is defined as, "[o]ne who studies above everything to dress elegantly and fashionably; a beau, fop, –exquisite"" (SIMPSON; WEINER, 1989, p. 324). In this definition, the dandy is primarily concerned about clothing, in such a way as to show his highly developed aesthetic awareness. Actually, there are two remarkable pieces of information in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The synonyms presented, "beau" and "fop", refer to a man who is much concerned with his dress and appearance, but the

definition also implies that the dandy is imbued with a notion of elegance, fashion and beauty, immanent in his character. Thus, the dandy is a male figure who has clearly established aesthetic principles, according to which he sets his own standards of elegant dress.

Amongst the citations of the word‘s use, the dictionary quotes Thomas Carlyle, one of Wilde‘s predecessors in the quest for aesthetic autonomy, who appears as one of the first to use this word in *Sartor Resartus* (1831):

> [a] Dandy is a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse, and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely […]: so that the others dress to live, he lives to dress (1831, p. 205).

According to Carlyle, a dandy is a man who gives excessive importance to his own physical appearance. For Carlyle, a dandy presents traits of futility and frivolity, for a man who focuses on external appearance is not concerned about the development of the mind or the intellect.

However, over 30 years later, Charles Baudelaire, in his article _The Painter of Modern Life‘ (1863), contradicting Carlyle‘s statement, asserted that the dandy raises aesthetics to a philosophical level. From Baudelaire‘s perspective, the dandy is no longer seen as a shallow man, but as a philosopher who wants to express his higher thoughts through his appearance:

> [t]hese beings have no other calling but to cultivate the idea of beauty in their persons, to satisfy their passions, to feel and think. [...] Dandyism does not even consist, as many thoughtless people seem to believe, in an immoderate taste for the toilet and material elegance. For the perfect dandy these things are no more than symbols of his aristocratic superiority of mind (BAUDELAIRE, 1995, p. 27).

Baudelaire argues that the dandy‘s worship of beauty is the best way to express his thoughts. It is implicit that, in the dandy‘s mind, beauty is a defined concept, which is the basis of his thoughts, feelings and action. Thus, the dandy‘s concern with appearances becomes his way of distinguishing himself in a society where everyone tends to be similar.

For other critics, the Wildean dandy is seen as a character that rebels against imposed standards, mocking them, while his witticisms are a way of expressing his disagreement with them. Arthur Ganz, in an essay entitled _The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of Oscar Wilde‘ (1969), argues that, in Wilde‘s society comedies, there is a conflict between two kinds of characters, the _dandy‘ and the _Philistine‘.

Ganz argues that the ‗Philistine' is composed of the puritanical characters, such as Lady Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs Arbuthnot and Miss Hester Worsley in *A Woman of No Importance* and Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*. Ganz states that the Philistine characters are opposed to the dandies, as the dandy characters are witty, funny and sharp, such as Dumby and Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, and Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*. Ganz also claims that ‗[t]he dandy [...] instead of acknowledging his sin, denies that sin exists and creates a set of dandiacal standards by which he indicts society itself' (1969, p. 485). Thus, the dandy has a subversive temperament and through his voice it is possible to glimpse a sharp criticism of society embodied in a single character.

Another important aspect of the dandy is indicated by Munira Mutran in *Álbum de retratos; George Moore, Oscar Wilde e William Butler Yeats no fim do século XIX: um momento cultural* (2002). According to her, the dandy ‗should possess huge wealth, which will allow him to live surrounded by the luxury and beauty which are part of his scenario, and enjoy complete leisure to converse and to stroll, taking delight in life in its multiple pleasures' (MUTRAN, 2002, p. 139).[14] The dandy's wealth would give him the opportunity to be hedonistic, for he would have plenty of leisure to be spent in the pursuit of pleasure. In Wilde's comedies, the dandies are members of the high society and, therefore, they do indeed possess large fortunes which enable them to be hedonists.

In Wilde's plays, the various definitions of the dandy – an individual concerned about clothing, a philosopher interested in aesthetics, a rebel opposed to society's manners, and a mere pleasure-seeker – are united to constitute a single character, the Wildean dandy.

The dandy is a character who is aesthetically concerned about his appearance, since he believes it shows the superiority of his mind. His exquisite external appearance reveals the refinement of his aesthetic taste, which in its turn, demonstrates his clear concept of beauty. Thus, the dandy's aesthetic concerns indicate that he may be regarded as the philosopher of Aestheticism. As beauty is his main concern, exquisite appearance guides his behaviour, which is no longer restricted by societal norms. The dandy is therefore free to be immoral, which, to some extent, enables society to consider him a decadent character.

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[14] In the original text: *'deve possuir imensa fortuna, que lhe permitirá viver cercado pelo luxo e beleza que fazem parte de seu cenário e desfrutar de completo lazer para conversar e flanar, gozando a vida em seus múltiplos prazeres'* (MUTRAN, 2002, p.139).

Conceited as he is, the dandy considers himself to be superior, which leads him to rebel against imposed standards and ridicule them, disdaining those values opposed to beauty. The dandy‘s ultimate goal is a life of pleasure, which is only permitted to him due to his enormous financial wealth. He is superficial but could hardly be considered plain; he is shallow without being naïve. His irony and wit confirm his brightness of mind as well as his self and public awareness. Therefore he is one of the most important elements in Wilde‘s plays.

The dandy, as a philosopher of beauty, is an Aesthete and, therefore, he propagates the ideas and principles of Wildean Aestheticism. As beauty has replaced other norms governing his behaviour, the dandy scorns the values embraced by society; hence, he criticises Victorian society‘s manners and mores, as they are opposed to his. After all, the dandy is capable of unifying aesthetic and social criticism, and through his figure, it is possible to glimpse Wilde‘s own standpoint in relation to art and life.

Despite the fact that all the definitions emphasise that the dandy is male, it has been argued in the present study that female characters may also be seen as dandies. Some of the most peculiar features of a dandy, such as the bright dialogue and immoral behaviour, are present in some of Wilde‘s female characters. For this reason, women in these plays can also be characterised as dandies. Consequently, all those characters who possess in their discourse dandiacal characteristics corroborate to spread the plays‘ aesthetic philosophy in addition to their social criticism.

In Wilde‘s plays, the dandy also has his/her own typical discourse, marked by the use of irony, oxymorons, and paradoxes. Wilde makes abundant employment of figures of speech amongst other literary devices, which make his works very rich in terms of language.

Irony is present in Wilde‘s plays both as a figure of speech and as a figure of thought. Irony as a figure of speech consists of the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning, whereas irony is a figure of thought when it involves not only the substitution of one word for its opposite, but extends across a whole idea. Irony as a figure of speech appears, for instance, in *An Ideal Husband*, when, in the Third Act, Lord Goring receives his father, Lord Caversham, in his house. During their conversation, Lord Caversham sneezes and Lord Goring comments on his sneezing to express sympathy:

> LORD CAVERSHAM: Oh, damn sympathy. There is a great deal too much of that sort of thing going on nowadays.

> LORD GORING: I quite agree with you, father. If there was less sympathy in the world there would be less trouble in the world.
> LORD CAVERSHAM [...]: That is a paradox, sir. I hate paradoxes.
> LORD GORING: So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious (WILDE, 2003, p. 556).

Lord Goring‘s last statement is ironic for it expresses the opposite of what he thinks. If Lord Goring really believed that paradoxes make society obvious, he would stop making so much use of them in his speech, for Lord Goring wants to be unique in his way of speaking and behaving. Lord Goring only agrees with Lord Caversham in order to make him think that he himself is so bright that he is tired by the great number of people who wish to seem as clever as he is. Thus, irony here, works as a tool to establish the behaviour of the dandy.

In the first act of *The Duchess of Padua*, Guido Ferranti‘s first meeting with the Duke of Padua, Simone Gesso, is marked by the fact that the Duke advises him how to behave in order to be a successful man. When the Duke asks if Guido understands what he is teaching him, Guido tells the Duke, _I do, your Grace, / And will in all things carry out the creed / Which you have taught me‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 615). Guido‘s answers to the Duke convey a deep irony for he really does intend to carry out the Duke‘s creed, but against the Duke himself. His words are therefore meant to express the opposite of what the Duke understands. As the Duke does not know of Guido‘s plans of revenge, he believes that Guido will follow his advice, but he has not got the faintest idea that Guido is in fact redirecting the Duke‘s advices against the advisor himself. Guido‘s words are, therefore, an example of irony as a figure of thought, for it is not only concentrated in words that convey the opposite of their meaning, but also in the whole idea of revenge, which can only be understood if considered in its whole context.

An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which incongruous or seemingly contradictory terms are combined. A paradox, in its turn, is similar to an oxymoron, for it consists of an apparently self-contradictory and even absurd statement which, on closer inspection, is found to contain a truth which reconciles the conflicting opposites. As paradoxes cause surprise and wonder, they are used to undermine the arguments of one‘s opponent. Whereas an oxymoron is an apparent contradiction caused by the juxtaposition of two words with opposite meanings, a paradox is an apparent contradiction caused by opposite ideas in a whole statement. Due to this difference, an oxymoron may be considered a compressed paradox. In fact, both oxymorons and

paradoxes present an apparent contradiction; therefore, they both create a new meaning for the words or ideas that are placed together, that is, the two words or ideas have an opposite meaning when taken separately, but, when they are joined, they create a third concept, which is commonly thought-provoking.

The oxymoron may be seen, for instance, in Lord Illingworth‘s remark in *A Woman of No Importance*, when in the First Act, the American girl, Hester Worsley, is mentioned and all the characters start discussing America. As Lord Illingworth makes some negative points about America, Mr Kelvil notices this and makes a comment about it:

> KELVIL: I am afraid you don't appreciate America, Lord Illingworth. It is a very remarkable country, especially considering its youth.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: The *youth* of America is their *oldest* tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years (WILDE, 2003, p. 470, italics added).

Lord Illingworth‘s answer opposes two words with contrary meanings, the noun ‗youth‘ and the superlative ‗oldest‘, to form a third concept, that America has been considered young for such a long time that being young can be regarded as an old tradition. By using an oxymoron in his discourse, Lord Illingworth is able to demonstrate the rapidity of his mind, for he is bright enough to perceive this contradiction and create an original idea from it.

As Wilde was a very creative playwright, the use of stylistic features in his characters‘ discourse is not only seen in the dandy‘s speech, but also in that of other characters too. The Duchess of Berwick, for instance, uses an oxymoron in one of her remarks in the first act of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. When the Duchess pays a visit to Lady Windermere to tell her hostess that Lord Windermere had been associated with a Mrs Erlynne, the Duchess advises Lady Windermere to take her husband away from London to a place where he would not have the opportunity to meet any other woman. In order to convince Lady Windermere that she is right, the Duchess of Berwick asserts that she had to take her own husband out of town several times:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: […] I assure you, my dear, that on several occasions after I was first married, I had to pretend to be very ill, and was obliged to drink the most unpleasant mineral waters, merely to get Berwick out of town. He was so extremely *susceptible*. Though I am bound to say he never gave away any large sums of money to anybody. He is far too *high-principled* for that! (WILDE, 2003, p. 427, italics added).

The Duchess uses two opposing adjectives to describe her husband, ‗susceptible' and ‗high-principled', but, considering the context of her explanation, she creates a new category to include her husband. If he were as high-principled as she claims, he would not be susceptible. Nevertheless, the Duchess' husband was not so susceptible to women's beauty as to give them large amounts of money. His honour was assured by financial concerns, although it would not prevent him from having an extramarital affair. Therefore, when the Duchess of Berwick affirms that her husband was susceptible and high-principled, she creates a third concept, which is the financial value of honour. Her husband's susceptibility goes as far as his money allows him to. His high principles, then, work within the barrier created by money. Due to the Duchess' remark, it is possible to see Wilde depicting a society that claims to be high-principled, but it is, in fact, driven by other values.

An instance of the dandy's use of paradox occurs in Mrs Erlynne's discourse, when she tells Lord Windermere that she is going to accept Lord Augustus' proposal. She justifies her choice by telling Lord Windermere that she is happy to marry a man like Lord Augustus, for ‗[…] there is a great deal of good in Lord Augustus. Fortunately it is all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be' (WILDE, 2003, p. 442). As Mrs Erlynne is happy to say that Lord Augustus' good qualities are on the surface and explains that she thinks that positive character traits should always be external rather than internal, it is clear that she contradicts common sense, according to which the best qualities a person can have are internal. Her ideas appear paradoxical for they are the opposite of what is considered reasonable. Through the use of paradox, the dandy Mrs Erlynne is able to state her ideas on the importance of appearances, showing that superficiality is not always a synonym for insignificance.

Wilde had the talent of using unexpected associations between contrasting or disparate words or ideas to make a clever humorous effect as well as to add stylistic resources to his discourse. In terms of stylistic features, Wilde employs many witticisms, epigrams and puns in his plays.

A witticism is a remark characterised by diversion and striking cleverness in expression, especially in speech or writing. A witticism can be seen as a kind of safety valve used to express, in jest, what one truly thinks. In *An Ideal Husband*, in the First Act, as Mrs Cheveley is talking to Sir Robert Chiltern, he asks her the reason for her coming to London, whether she has come for politics or pleasure, to which she answers that:

> MRS CHEVELEY: Politics are my only pleasure. You see nowadays it is not fashionable to flirt till one is forty, or to be romantic till one is forty-five, so we poor women who are under thirty, or say we are, have nothing open to us but politics or philanthropy. And philanthropy seems to me to have become simply the refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow-creatures. I prefer politics. I think they are more . . . becoming! (WILDE, 2003, p. 520).

The witticism in Mrs Cheveley‘s answer is focused directly on her comment about philanthropy, for it is a playful remark through which Mrs Erlynne announces what she really believes about works of charity. Mrs Erlynne‘s comment not only clarifies her negative opinion about philanthropy, but also helps to establish her nature, for she considers herself to amuse people, rather than annoy them, as philanthropists do. Mrs Erlynne‘s witticism is used both to reveal her thoughts and characterise her as a bright woman.

An epigram is a concise, clever and often contradictory statement, which is often characterised by humour. It is in the same field as proverbs; therefore, it is distinguished by its shortness and sharpness. In *Vera, or The Nihilists*, Prince Paul, the most dandy-like character, is the one who most makes use of stylistic devices in his discourse. Prince Paul asserts he does not mind being hated, for people‘s feelings for him show him to be a powerful man. When asked by the Czarevitch how his life will be after death, he states that he hopes he will still be in command: ‗Heaven is a despotism. I shall be at home there‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 698). Prince Paul‘s statement sounds absurd because it contradicts the common belief that although God is a sovereign, He is a fair king, quite the contrary of Prince Paul and the Czar. As Prince Paul seems to think he will feel at home with a sovereign, he is not only equalling God to the Czar, but also showing that he thinks that he will still have the same power to manipulate Heaven‘s sovereign that he enjoys with the Czar. Moreover, his comment once more shows how conceited he is, for he is sure that he will go to heaven after death, contradicting the commonly accepted belief that only good souls go to Heaven.

A pun is a play on words in order to demonstrate one‘s linguistic abilities. There may be homophones with different spellings and/or meanings, or homophones with the same spelling, but different meanings. The title of Wilde‘s masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the ultimate example of the use of pun, for Wilde is playing with the sound of the adjective ‗earnest‘ and the proper noun ‗Ernest‘. The pun creates an ambiguity as the play is enacted, for the audience does not know which word is being said in the final line of the play, when John states that he has realised for the first time

in his life the vital importance of being earnest/Ernest. Obviously this ambiguity only occurs in the enactment of the play, for the play‘s text dispels the readers‘ uncertainty about Wilde‘s choice of words. In fact, much is revealed about John as the readers come to know that he utters the adjective ‗earnest‘ instead of the noun ‗Ernest‘. As John is a character who tries to be a dandy but fails to do so, his conclusion that it is of vital importance to be ‗earnest‘ implies that, even after solving the paradox of his existence, he continues to tend towards traditionalism rather than innovation, unlike the dandy. Therefore, John is characterised, from the beginning till the end, as a man incapable of discarding Victorian values.

The dandy can be easily identified in all Wilde‘s plays by his/her clever lines, which are usually responsible for producing the most amusing effects and provoking laughter in the audience. The dandy‘s irony works as a weapon which he manipulates in order to state his ideas under the cover of jokes. Thus, through the dandy, Wilde is able to disseminate Aestheticism, while criticising society‘s values.

Wilde made several attempts to conceptualise art and morals, aesthetics and ethics in different realms. However, in his plays, he dissociates morality from the arts, and approaches the subject mainly to expose the hypocrisy of society. By doing so, he is mocking at a self-conceited society and ridiculing the norm, as a perfect dandy, the philosopher of the Aesthetic Movement, would do.

From the beginning of his career as a playwright, in the tragedies, which are not set in a Victorian scenario, Wilde already stressed the fact that every society is based upon idealistic values, that is, principles which do not correspond to what happens in reality. These principles are not always grounded on people‘s actual behaviour, but on rules which aim to standardise that behaviour.

Both in *Vera, or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*, Wilde presents characters whose words and behaviour resemble the those of the dandy, for they are ironic, and through them it is possible to apprehend Wilde‘s social criticism. They are Prince Paul in *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, and Simone Gesso, in *The Duchess of Padua*, respectively. Although neither of them are strictly ‗dandies‘, they both share characteristics in common with the traditional comic type of character. Just like dandies, Prince Paul and Simone Gesso use witticisms, epigrams and irony in their speech to criticise the society in which they live. However, as villains, their speech and behaviour have some traits of cruelty, and their ironic discourse tends towards spitefulness. Nonetheless, their discourse is also amusing, which helps to lighten the seriousness of

the tragedies. Furthermore, neither Prince Paul nor Simone Gesso have any kind of concern in relation to beauty, and nor are they spokesmen for Aestheticism, unlike Wildean dandies. Their social criticism is not motivated by their preference of beauty over social values; hence, they cannot be considered dandies in the strict sense of the term.

In order to distinguish the dandies themselves from those characters who merely resemble dandies, it is necessary to examine how each of them is presented in the plays, in terms of their characterisation, action and discourse. In *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, Prince Paul, the character who comes closest to the figure of a dandy, has one of the most remarkable dandiacal features, conceitedness. Prince Paul resembles the dandy when he affirms he is fond of being misunderstood:

> BARON RAFF: I cannot understand your nature.
> PRINCE PAUL (*smiling*): If my nature had been made to suit your comprehension rather than my own requirements, I am afraid I would have made a very poor figure in the world (WILDE, 2003, p. 698).

Prince Paul obviously assumes that being misunderstood reveals the superiority of his state of mind. Instead of acting with a false modesty that does not belong to him, he is keen to demonstrate his supremacy over others. This characteristic also reveals a trait of pride, which may be related to Prince Paul‘s arrogance, which distinguishes him from the Wildean dandy. Although the dandy is conceited, the comic and often ironic quality of his witty speech helps to dissipate the image of pomposity that exists in Prince Paul. Moreover, Prince Paul is a cynical and cruel character, and he is proud of being so:

> PRINCE PAUL: Yes, I know I'm the most hated man in Russia, except your father, except your father, of course, Prince. He doesn't seem to like it much, by the way, but I do, I assure you. (*Bitterly.*) I love to drive through the streets and see how the canaille scowl at me from every corner. It makes me feel I am a power in Russia; one man against a hundred millions! (WILDE, 2003, p. 698).

Wilde‘s stage direction shows that Prince Paul‘s comment on how he feels about being hated should be uttered in a resentful tone, which indicates that he does not have the weightlessness of the dandy, for the dandy‘s scorn is careless and trivial. Nonetheless, the opposition between serious and trivial is present in Prince Paul‘s discourse, as he claims that _life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 698). Wilde would use the same line in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* years later, which shows that, in the comedy, he was still fascinated by the idea of contrary concepts. Even so, Prince Paul‘s comment on triviality in *Vera* is not enough to

characterise him as being trivial, like Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, mainly due to Prince Paul's bitterness.

On the other hand, it can hardly be said that Prince Paul's lines bring no more than entertainment to the play, for his acid comments on differences in social classes are a social criticism, which is also a feature of the dandy. Like a dandy, Prince Paul ridicules social rules. Therefore, every time he is ironic or satirical, he adopts an attitude similar to that of the dandy. The first instance of this trait of his speech occurs when he gives a sharp answer to the Czarevitch's complaints:

> CZAREVITCH (*bitterly*): My Imperial father had kept me for six months in this dungeon of a palace. This morning he has me suddenly woken up to see some wretched Nihilists hung; it sickened me, the bloody butchery, though it was a noble thing to see how well these men can die.
> PRINCE PAUL: When you are as old as I am, Prince, you will understand that there are few things easier than to live badly and to die well (WILDE, 2003, p. 696).

Prince Paul's comment is both acidic and wise, for it shows his experience in a court ruled by a sovereign as well as by his governing body, who only want to live in ostentatious wealth, regardless of the needs of the nation, whose people are starving in the streets. As an insider, he is conscious of how unbalanced Russia's government system is, though he does not have the intention of leaving the court or rebelling against injustice. As long as this unbalanced government favours him, he does not mind being considered a tyrant.

Another sardonic comment is made in a dialogue between Prince Petrovitch and Prince Paul. Prince Paul notices that something is annoying Prince Petrovitch. He tries to guess what it is, and asks if he has received a letter from Vera Sabouroff, but Prince Petrovitch tells Prince Paul that the Nihilists are not his main worry at that moment:

> PRINCE PETROVITCH: Wrong again, Prince; the Nihilists leave me alone for some reason or other.
> PRINCE PAUL (*aside*): Ah! true. I forgot. Indifference is the revenge the world takes on mediocrities (WILDE, 2003, p. 698).

At first, Prince Paul's questions to find out what is annoying Prince Petrovitch sounds like concern about his colleague. However, his aside reveals the true nature of his character, for it shows his real thoughts of Prince Petrovitch. Prince Paul's answer refers to fame and glory. As he affirms that the world is indifferent to mediocrity, he suggests that the world repays excellence with magnificent distinction, for the world recognises great value in the superiority of those whose minds are brilliant and whose attitudes

have the merit of being felicitated. Clearly, Prince Paul considers himself to be among the outstanding, not the mediocre.

Another instance of Prince Paul‘s sarcasm occurs when the Czarevitch shows his clemency towards the people and intercedes on their behalf with his father, the Czar. Prince Paul makes it clear that he is against any kind of distribution of wealth, for it would empower the people enough to take power: _CZAREVITCH: Father! have mercy on the people. Give them what they ask. / PRINCE PAUL: And begin, Sire, with your own head; they have a particular liking for that (WILDE, 2003, p. 702). By telling the Czar that the people have a particular liking for his head, Prince Paul insinuates that the people are infuriated with his government and are ready to kill their sovereign in order to have their needs met. In doing so, Prince Paul not only dismiss the Czarevitch‘s appeal, but also incites the Czar to go in the opposite direction, indicating that the people should not be listened to, for they do not honour their monarch. As the Czar is easily manipulated by Prince Paul, he does not consider the Czarevitch‘s petition, which meets Prince Paul‘s will.

The fact that Prince Paul recognises that he is one of the most hated men in Russia due to his cruel acts towards the people reveals not only that he is aware that social inequality exists, but also that he benefits from it. Therefore, his cynicism can be considered a means for Wilde to denounce social injustices.

Although Prince Paul‘s comments carry a sarcastic social criticism, his sharp ironic speech follows no aesthetic principles. Prince Paul is witty and clever, but his sarcastic comments either target other characters, or flatter himself. Such is the case in the scene when Prince Paul is reading the Nihilists‘ creed:

> PRINCE PAUL (*reading*): "The rights of humanity!" In the old times men carried out their rights for themselves as they lived, but nowadays every baby seems born with a social manifesto in its mouth much bigger than itself. "Nature is not a temple, but a workshop: we demand the right to labour." Ah, I shall surrender my own rights in that respect [...] (WILDE, 2003, p. 708).

It is clear that Prince Paul does not agree that men should have their rights recognised, and his comment targets precisely his contempt in relation to this controversial difference between himself and the Nihilists. When Prince Paul discovers that the Nihilists are in favour of labour, he affirms that he will give up this right, for he does not consider himself suitable for work. As Prince Paul spends the play showing how he considers himself to be superior to other people, he does not intend to be reduced to the

same level as common people, who have to work for their livelihood. Therefore, when Prince Paul is not criticising what he is against, he is complimenting himself, and his lines are not intended to praise beauty, or to recognise any kind of aesthetic value. Prince Paul is so vain that there is no room left to praise anything else but himself. Thus, as his speech does not carry aesthetic values, Prince Paul cannot be considered a true Wildean dandy. Even so, Prince Paul is the only character who resembles the dandy in *Vera* and the only one who voices some of Wilde‘s views. Even though he does not stand for Wilde‘s aesthetic ideas, his speech reveals Wilde‘s social criticism, and therefore it can be considered that he is expressing ideas on the author‘s behalf.

The same occurs in Wilde‘s second play, *The Duchess of Padua*, for the Duke of Padua, Simone Gesso, resembles the dandy just as Prince Paul does. Even though the Duke cannot be considered a dandy, for he lacks the dandy‘s aesthetic philosophy, he has some resemblance to this special character, as he is witty and his speech is ironic.

When the Duke first meets Guido and Count Moranzone, he spends some time trying to impress them, by giving advice on how one should behave to be respected in the world. In his discourse, the Duke is conceited, and proud of his cruelty:

> DUKE: Have prudence; in your dealings with the world
> Be not too hasty; act on the second thought,
> First impulses are generally good. […]
> See thou hast enemies,
> Else will the world think very little of thee,
> It is its test of power; yet see you show
> A smiling mask of friendship to all men,
> Until you have them safely in your grip,
> Then you can crush them. […]
> And be not over-scrupulous; clean hands
> With nothing in them make a sorry show.
> If you would have the lion‘s share of life
> You must wear the fox‘s skin. Oh, it will fit you;
> It is a coat which fitteth every man.
> The fat, the lean, the tall man, and the short,
> Whoever makes that a coat, boy, is a tailor
> That never lacks a customer (WILDE, 2003, p. 614).

His advice reveals his cynicism. The Duke considers a man with many enemies to be respectable, a man for whom the world has great esteem. In this respect, his thoughts are similar to those of Prince Paul in *Vera*. In his speech, the Duke also advises Guido to be intentionally deceptive in order to control other people and to be prepared to subjugate them. The Duke shows he is unprincipled, for he claims no man should have clean hands. He exhorts men not to be excessively scrupulous when it comes to honesty.

Finally, he shows he is sceptical about humankind, for he generalises when he maintains that an unreliable character can be worn by every man.

Like Prince Paul, in *Vera*, Simone Gesso is cruel and cynical. In the scene when the Duchess comes to beg for his mercy in favour of the people, his answers are mordant:

> DUCHESS: […] They say the bread, the very bread they eat,
> Is made of sorry chaff.
> FIRST CITIZEN: Ay! so it is,
> Nothing but chaff.
> DUKE: And very good food too, I give it to my horses.
> DUCHESS [*restraining herself*]: They say the water,
> Set in the public cisterns for their use,
> Has, through the breaking of the aqueduct,
> To stagnant pools and muddy puddles turned.
> DUKE: They should drink wine; water is quite unwholesome.
> SECOND CITIZEN: Alack, your Grace, the taxes which the customs
> Take at the city gate are grown so high
> We cannot buy wine.
> DUKE: Then you should bless the taxes
> Which make you temperate (WILDE, 2003, p. 620).

By saying that chaff is the food he gives to his horses – and insinuating that his horses are extremely well treated – the Duke equates his people with his horses, which implies that the people should not be discontented with the treatment he gives them. Still trying to touch his heart, the Duchess then tells the Duke about the bad quality of the water the people have at their disposal, to which he sardonically replies that they should drink wine instead, as it is better for their health – as if he had any kind of worry about the people‘s health. When the citizen replies that they cannot buy wine, for they spend all their money on taxes, the Duke tells him that taxes help the people stay sober. As the Duke keeps dodging the Duchess‘s and the people‘s petitions, he shows he is cunning and deceptive.

The Duke evades his obligations once more, when a citizen comes to complain he has no money to bury his son. Simone Gesso is so cynical that he directs his answer towards a specific part of the citizen‘s complaint in order to shift the focus of the dialogue:

> THIRD CITIZEN […]: My little son died yesternight from hunger;
> He was but six years old; I am so poor,
> I cannot bury him.
> DUKE: If you are poor,
> Are you not blessed in that? Why, poverty
> Is one of the Christian virtues,
> [*Turns to the CARDINAL.*]
> Is it not? (WILDE, 2003, p. 621).

The citizen‘s son was a victim of the unjust system of government, since the boy died from hunger. However, Simone Gesso changes the main subject and focuses on the fact that the citizen has one of the Christian virtues, without mentioning the burial of his son. When he asks the Cardinal to confirm his statement, the Duke seeks to lend credibility to his speech. Having his attitudes endorsed by the Cardinal, Simone Gesso acts as if he were being approved of by a higher power, such as God‘s.

As the Duchess keeps trying to convince the Duke to have mercy on the people, he, again, washes his hands of monarchic responsibilities and assumes the role of saviour when he claims he should be thanked for sending the people directly to Heaven:

> DUCHESS: Nay but, my lord the Duke, be generous; [...]
> There are many citizens of Padua
> Who in vile tenements live so full of holes,
> That the chill rain, the snow, and the rude blast,
> Are tenants also with them [...]
> DUKE: And so they go to Abraham‘s bosom, Madam.
> They should thank me for sending them to Heaven,
> If they are wretched here.
> [*To the CARDINAL.*]
> Is it not said
> Somewhere in Holy Writ, that every man
> Should be contented with that state of life
> God calls him to? Why should I change their state,
> Or meddle with an all-wise providence,
> Which has apportioned that some men should starve,
> And others surfeit? I did not make the world (WILDE, 2003, p. 621).

When the Duke refers to the Holy Writ, in order to support his opinion, and argues he is not to blame if the world is unfair, he is echoing one of the characters in *Vera*, Peter Sabouroff, who also claims he did not make the world, and so it is not his responsibility to look after it. The great difference between Peter Sabouroff and Simone Gesso is that the first is an innkeeper, whereas the latter is the highest authority in Padua, and indeed he has the duty to care for the people, even though he is sly enough to deny it.

When Simone Gesso declares that poverty is one of the Christian virtues and when he claims that he is responsible for sending people to heaven, there is an acid criticism of the manipulation of the biblical texts in order to favour aristocracy. The fact that, in both situations, the Cardinal remains silent, which helps the Duke to establish his discourse as true is also revealing. The Cardinal‘s silence at a moment when he should stand up for the sheep of his flock reveals that he also manipulates people for his own benefit. Thus, the Duke of Padua is a character whose speech is scornful, but through it, it is possible to see Oscar Wilde‘s criticism of the cruel sovereignty of the

aristocracy. It should be remembered that Wilde also wrote *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in which he expounds a liberal socialist worldview.

Through Prince Paul in *Vera* and Simone Gesso in *The Duchess of Padua*, Wilde denounces hypocrisy in general terms in the tragedies. However, it is in the comedies that he specifically targets Victorian society, for his comedies are all set in a contemporary scenario. What Wilde does when he denounces Victorian hypocrisy is to reveal that people pretend to fit those categories – good/bad, serious/trivial, moral/immoral –, but they are actually moved by appetites which can hardly be considered standard.

Another difference between the comedies and tragedies regarding the dandy is that, in the comedies, the figure of the dandy is more frequent. There is at least one dandy character in each comedy. The dandy, Wilde‘s philosopher and mouthpiece, is responsible for pointing out failures in the Victorian system of values. The dandy is a deviation from the norm; hence, he does not have a patterned behaviour and does not fit any category established by society. As an outsider, the dandy is able to *contemplate* everything from a privileged perspective, and therefore, he is the most appropriate character to criticise Victorian thought, in which he is immersed. Through his funny lines, the dandy is able to mock Victorian values without being considered despicable. The audience laughs at the dandy‘s amusing discourse, without noticing that it itself is being targeted by the mockery.

Another remarkable point regarding the dandies in the comedies is that there is a progression in their characterisation from Wilde‘s first comedy to his last one. The dandies in the first comedies, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, are more similar to Prince Paul and the Duke of Padua, for they are either villains or, at least, antagonists. In *An Ideal Husband*, there is a change, as there is a dandy, Mrs Cheveley, who is an antagonist, and, for the first time, Wilde introduces a dandy, Lord Goring, as a good character. Finally, the dandies in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are chiefly good characters, and there is only one antagonistic dandy: Lady Bracknell. In addition to this progression in characterisation, the dandies in the comedies present all the other features that constitute them as dandies, such as a specific type of discourse, some degree of concern with appearances, as well as their articulation of Wildean aesthetic theories and hedonism.

In Wilde‘s first comedy, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the dandy, Lord Darlington, is the character responsible for denouncing Victorian hypocrisy. Through his

epigrammatic and ironic speech, he is able to point out some of the cracks in the English system of values and principles. As a dandy, Lord Darlington has his own set of values, which does not correspond to those of Victorian Society:

> LORD DARLINGTON: Do you know I am afraid that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Certainly the greatest harm they do is that they make badness of such extraordinary importance. It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming, and you, Lady Windermere, can‘t help belonging to them (WILDE, 2003, p. 423).

According to Victorian values, people may be split in two categories: good or bad. The dandy, Lord Darlington, is proposing to classify them in different categories, charming or tedious, for the Victorian group does not include those people who are essentially good but, for one reason or another, harm their loved ones. Lord Darlington is clearly referring to Lord Windermere, who is considered essentially good and whose conduct towards Mrs Erlynne is seen as reprehensible, as it may harm Lady Windermere. Thus Lord Darlington, once more reveals that Victorian society‘s system of values is a failure. It does not cover every aspect of life in society.

Lord Darlington is also presented as a dandy who has no moral principles, and rather than replacing his morality with an aesthetic code, he has only discarded his uprightness and turned out to be unreliable. He is even described as such by another character, the Duchess of Berwick:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK [...]: Dear Margaret, I am so pleased to see you. You remember Agatha, don‘t you? [...] How do you do, Lord Darlington? I won‘t let you know my daughter, you are far too wicked.
> LORD DARLINGTON: Don‘t say that, Duchess. As a wicked man I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. Of course they only say it behind my back (WILDE, 2003, p. 424).

Being wicked may be considered a common dandiacal characteristic in Wilde‘s plays. As the personification of the Aesthetic philosopher, the dandy believes that ethics and aesthetics belong to complete separate spheres and, therefore, he does not necessarily need to have high moral principles in order to transmit aesthetic values. In fact, some dandies really replace ethics with aesthetics, but this is not the case of Lord Darlington. Nonetheless, he still serves as a mouthpiece for Wildean aesthetic doctrine.

Lord Darlington also shares a feature in common with some of Wilde‘s other dandies. Like Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*, who is described as a man who is _fond of being misunderstood [for] it gives him a post of vantage‘ (WILDE, 2003, p.

521, note added), Lord Darlington believes that being misunderstood gives him some benefits:

> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.
> LORD DARLINGTON [...]: I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out (WILDE, 2003, p. 425).

Both Lord Darlington and Lord Goring echo Gilbert in ‗The Critic as Artist', when Gilbert tells Ernest: ‗Don't let us discuss anything solemnly. I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood' (WILDE, 2003, p. 1114). These dandies feel that if people do not comprehend them it is because they cannot follow their complex lines of thought. Thus, being misunderstood would prove their superiority of mind. Because of that, Lord Darlington and Lord Goring act as if the secret of their brightness would be protected by unintelligibility. As both Lord Darlington and Lord Goring share their ideas with Gilbert, it is also clear that, for all of them, society is composed of mediocre people, who evaluate others based on their pedestrian criteria. Therefore, being treated seriously by unexceptional people would also attest to someone's mediocrity.

The other dandy character in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is Mrs Erlynne. At the beginning of the play, she is Lady Windermere's antagonist, a role which is transformed at the end, as she becomes her daughter's saviour. This alteration, from villain to heroine, does not alter the fact that Mrs Erlynne is a spokeswoman for aesthetic principles in her speech. Moreover, her speech is also epigrammatic, which is so characteristic of dandies: ‗MRS ERLYNNE: Charming ball it has been! Quite reminds me of old days. *(Sits on sofa.)* And I see that there are just as many fools in society as there used to be. So pleased to find that nothing has altered!' (WILDE, 2003, p. 441). Mrs Erlynne is clearly conceited, for she thinks she is cleverer than ordinary people in society. Moreover, she rejoices in finding that she still can consider herself brighter than common people, even after spending so many years away from society. In this sense, she is similar to Lord Darlington, Lord Goring and even Gilbert, for she thinks that society consists of dull undistinguished people.

Mrs Erlynne's lines to Lord Windermere at the end of the play, when she tells him that she does not intend to inform Lady Windermere that she is her mother, has one of the dandy's most recognised characteristics, the concern about appearances:

> MRS ERLYNNE: […] *(Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh.)* Besides, my dear Windermere, how on earth could I pose as a mother with a grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one, and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most. Twenty-nine when there are pink shades, thirty when there are not (WILDE, 2003, p. 459-60).

As a dandy, Mrs Erlynne worries about her appearance, for it serves to display her interior brightness. When Mrs Erlynne asserts that she does not admit to being older than thirty, and adds that, depending on the colour of the curtains, she claims she is even younger, she is affirming that pink reflected light gives her a more youthful appearance. Mrs Erlynne‘s remark shows that aesthetic value is personal and is subject to interpretation.

In addition to the aesthetic value Mrs Erlynne‘s words carry when taken out of the context, it is worth remembering that Mrs Erlynne‘s statement about her age is made just after she has told Lord Windermere that she does not intend to inform Lady Windermere of the whole truth about their relationship. Wilde‘s stage direction about the fact that Mrs Erlynne laughs trivially to hide her feelings adds a new meaning to Mrs Erlynne‘s words, for her comment on her concern about her youthful appearance is intended to cover the fact that she feels emotive when she talks about her relationship with her daughter. In fact, the apparent frivolity of Mrs Erlynne‘s comment reaches its target, for she convinces Lord Windermere that she is so superficial as to hide motherly feelings only to protect the secret of her age.

However, it is important to clarify that Mrs Erlynne‘s comment is not a lie. She indeed never admits she is older than thirty years old, and admitting to being Lady Windermere‘s mother would ruin her youthful mask. The fact is that, deep inside, Mrs Erlynne is more afraid of her feelings than of admitting to society that she is around forty years old. Obviously she will never confess that to her son-in-law; therefore, she uses her concern about her appearance as an argument to pretend that she is too superficial to care about feelings. Through this assertion, Mrs Erlynne shows herself to be cunning, smart and witty, and these features, added to the aesthetic values in her discourse, characterise her as a dandy.

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth and Mrs Allonby are the two characters who have the characteristics of a dandy: both are given to making witty remarks through which it is possible to see some aesthetic features. In the scene when

Lord Illingworth is talking to Gerald, the father gives the son some advice in relation to proper behaviour in London society:

> LORD ILLINGWORTH: Ah! she [Mrs Arbuthnot] is not modern, and to be modern is the only thing worth being nowadays. You want to be modern, don‘t you, Gerald? You want to know life as it really is. Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life. Well, what you have to do at present is simply to fit yourself for the best society. A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule.
> GERALD: I should like to wear nice things awfully, but I have always been told that a man should not think too much about his clothes.
> LORD ILLINGWORTH: People nowadays are so absolutely superficial that they don‘t understand the philosophy of the superficial. By the way, Gerald, you should learn how to tie your tie better. Sentiment is all very well for the button-hole. But the essential thing for a necktie is style. A welltied tie is the first serious step in life (WILDE, 2003, p. 493, note added).

Lord Illingworth‘s assertion that Mrs Arbuthnot is not modern clarifies one of Wilde‘s opinions about modernity. Being modern is not only being against the past and tradition, it is also related to irreverence when dealing with pre-established patterns. As Lord Illingworth states that Gerald wants to ‗know life as it really is‘, Lord Illingworth implies that Gerald should understand the system of values in Victorian society so as to learn how to play society‘s game. If Gerald is able to understand the rules, he can manage to be considered a member of high society without having to obey those rules strictly. As in Victorian society appearances were highly cultivated, learning how to exhibit style through a tie-knot was of fundamental importance to being taken seriously. Through Lord Illingworth‘s comment it is possible to apprehend Wilde‘s irony regarding Victorian society. Wilde seizes the idea that societal conventions on morals and appearances are so inextricably connected that they merge. Therefore, working on the appearance of respectability is the same as controlling society.

The comprehension of the system of values in society allows Wilde to be irreverent in reworking pre-established patterns. By elucidating it, Wilde is once more opposing life and art, while assuming that the aims of both art and modernity are the same. As, for him, in modern art criticism one should see the work of art ‗as in itself it really is not‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1128), in modernity one should see life as it really is. Showing that to Victorian Society was Wilde‘s ultimate goal.

When Lord Illingworth adds that Gerald should be appropriate for the best society, he is not contradicting what he has said previously. In fact, his opinion is that

Gerald, firstly, has to obtain a place for himself at the best tables of London society and, after that, rule them. This line of reasoning indicates that, for Lord Illingworth, and, thus, for Wilde, this is the proper way to get ready for altering style, customs and thoughts. Only if one is an insider in high society is one prepared to transform it.

Lord Illingworth goes on to assert that the dandy, or the exquisite, is going to rule the world and control the future, for the dandy understands the philosophy of the superficial. As Gerald makes clear, he is willing to learn from his master, especially about how to dress better. Lord Illingworth advises him to have style when tying his tie, and sentiment when choosing his buttonhole. In this excerpt, one sees that in *A Woman of No Importance* the dandy was already considered the well-dressed philosopher of thought, as he would be described in *An Ideal Husband*.

Once more, Wilde shows that he is keen to revise the standard philosophy and, by emphasising the depth of surfaces, he proves he is in control of paradoxes. This is another typical feature of the Wildean dandy. He is able to handle paradoxes in order to represent Wilde‘s beliefs, as exposed in _The Truth of Masks‘. After all, _there is no such a thing as a universal truth‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1173).

Wilde‘s characters sometimes echo one another by repeating the same lines in different plays. This kind of intertextual procedure is also used by the characters in Wilde‘s critical dialogues, such as _The Decay of Lying‘ and _The Critic as Artist‘. When Lord Illingworth explains to Mrs Allonby that passion is the only thing one should take seriously, for _[n]othing is serious except passion. The intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument on which one plays, that is all‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 471-2), he echoes Gilbert in _The Critic as Artist‘, when the latter affirms:

> GILBERT: […] Art is a passion, and, in matters of art, Thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, depending upon fine moods and exquisite moments, cannot be narrowed into the rigidity of a scientific formula or a theological dogma. It is to the soul that Art speaks, and the soul may be made the prisoner of the mind as well as of the body (WILDE, 2003, p. 1144).

Both Lord Illingworth and Gilbert consider that emotion rather than thought should be treated seriously. For Lord Illingworth, it is possible to play with the mind, whereas for Gilbert, considering thought in terms of science is equivalent to limiting it. The only way to handle thought in endless ways is to treat it as susceptible and responsive to

change. As a dandy, Lord Illingworth may therefore be seen as a mouthpiece for Wilde‘s own aesthetic views in *A Woman of No Importance*.

Whereas Lord Illingworth is the mouthpiece for Wilde‘s ideas in *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs Allonby does not serve as a mouthpiece for aesthetic principles in her discourse. However, she resembles the dandy, for she is far too conceited and her observations are always made to show how clever she is:

> MRS ALLONBY: Don‘t find yourself longing for a London dinner-party?
> HESTER: I dislike London dinner-parties.
> MRS ALLONBY: I adore them. The clever people never listen, and the stupid people never talk.
> HESTER: I think the stupid people talk a great deal.
> MRS ALLONBY: Ah, I never listen! (WILDE, 2003, p. 475).

She shows Hester that, unlike her, who listens to stupid people talking, she considers herself to be in the category of clever people, who never listen, and, thus, she wants to express the superiority of her state of mind. Even though she has some of the characteristics of a dandy, Mrs Allonby does not convey aesthetic thoughts in her speeches. Unlike Lord Illingworth, her only role is to entertain the audience.

In Wilde‘s third comedy, *An Ideal Husband*, there are three dandies: Lord Goring, Miss Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley. Whereas Lord Goring and Miss Mabel are good characters, Mrs Cheveley is the villain. Nevertheless, as ethics and aesthetics belong to different spheres, being good or bad does not interfere with the defence of aesthetic values.

Miss Mabel Chiltern is witty, irreverent and unconventional in terms of Victorian standards, for she is not a quiet and restrained girl, and she even confesses her love to Lord Goring at the end of the play, revealing that she is daring and self-confident. She is given to making unexpected and amusing assertions, which reveals her brightness. She defies society‘s values and supports hedonism. In fact, Miss Mabel Chiltern defends the commitment to pleasurable activities. In the first act, Miss Mabel Chiltern meets Lord Caversham at the Chilterns‘ house, and when Lord Caversham asks if his ‗good-for-nothing‘ son has arrived yet, Miss Mabel Chiltern politely disagrees with him:

> MABEL CHILTERN: [...] Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?
> [...]
> LORD CAVERSHAM: Because he leads such an idle life.
> MABEL CHILTERN: How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o‘clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three

> times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don‘t call that leading an idle life, do you? (WILDE, 2003, p. 516).

As Lord Caversham criticises his son‘s behaviour by saying that he has an inactive life, Miss Mabel Chiltern justifies her loved one‘s conduct, arguing that his numerous leisure activities should count as occupation. As Miss Mabel Chiltern considers pleasure one of the most serious and important forms of occupation, she also reveals that she is a hedonist. Thus, Wilde‘s comic characters embody his life philosophy, a life of pleasure.

In fact, Lord Caversham also complains to his own son, Lord Goring, about the fact that he seems to be living a life of pleasure when they meet at the Chilterns‘ house in the first act: _LORD CAVERSHAM: You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure. / LORD GORING: What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 523). As a hedonist, Lord Goring considers _pleasure‘ to keep one young, whereas _happiness‘, which is the objective of adjusted members of conventional society, leads to ageing. As Lord Goring wants to keep his youth, he does not intend to depart with his life of pleasure, for, in his opinion, it is the only way worth living.

Miss Mabel Chiltern‘s discourse is marked by the use of epigrams and paradoxes, and her lines carry some degree of aestheticism. Miss Mabel Chiltern has a great self-esteem and she is realistic and down-to-earth, for, at the end of the play, she tells Lord Caversham that she does not want Lord Goring to be an ideal husband for her. Instead, she would rather be a real wife for him. Miss Mabel Chiltern also plays Wilde‘s game between triviality and seriousness:

> LADY CHILTERN *[Looking at him in surprise.]*: Lord Goring, you are talking quite seriously. I don't think I ever heard you talk seriously before.
> LORD GORING [*Laughing.*]: You must excuse me, Lady Chiltern. It won't occur again, if I can help it.
> LADY CHILTERN. But I like you to be serious.
> *[Enter MABEL CHILTERN, in the most ravishing frock.]*
> MABEL CHILTERN. Dear Gertrude, don't say such a dreadful thing to Lord Goring. Seriousness would be very unbecoming to him. Good afternoon Lord Goring! Pray be as trivial as you can (WILDE, 2003, p. 543-4).

As Miss Mabel Chiltern enters, she listens only to Lady Gertrude Chiltern‘s comment that she enjoys seeing Lord Goring speaking so seriously. Based on Lady Chiltern‘s comment, Miss Mabel Chiltern adds her own opinion on the subject: she prefers that Lord Goring maintains his trivial behaviour, for it is more appropriate for him. In fact,

according to Wilde‘s first stage direction in the extract, seriousness is not a common characteristic of Lord Goring. As Lady Chiltern is really surprised about his sudden serious behaviour, and even tells him that she has never seen him talking so seriously before, it is clear that Lord Goring is openly trivial. Therefore, Miss Mabel Chiltern and Lord Goring are perfect mates, for they are both fond of triviality and they are also clever, sharp and conceited.

Another point of coincidence between Miss Mabel Chiltern and Lord Arthur Goring is that both of them are described as characters who do not want other people to have a positive image of them. As both of them underestimate other people‘s intelligence, they think that ordinary people‘s evaluation of them contributes very poorly to their image before society. Moreover, both of them, as dandies, are more concerned about aesthetic standards rather than traditional principles. Knowing that they are evaluated according to old-fashioned Victorian criteria, they scorn the value of this kind of assessment.

Lord Goring, in his turn, is quite ironic when he points out English hypocritical manners. After Sir Robert Chiltern confesses his immoral behaviour to Lord Goring, the dandy does not advise his friend to confess his crime before society. In fact, Lord Goring‘s comment is remarkably sarcastic:

> LORD GORING: Besides, if you did make a clean breast of the whole affair, you would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can‘t talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician. There would be nothing left for him as a profession except Botany or the Church. A confession would be of no use. It would ruin you (WILDE, 2003, p. 539).

Lord Goring points to the English hypocritical code of behaviour, for he argues that a politician‘s career should be immaculate so that he can exhort morality in an audience constituted mostly by people who are immoral. Lord Goring‘s statement that, ‗in England a man who can‘t talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician‘ is a witticism, for it shows through a jest what Wilde truly thought about the hypocrisy of English society.

Although both Mrs Cheveley and Lord Goring denounce the hypocrisy of Victorian society, Lord Goring is sometimes very serious when he talks about morality. That is the main characteristic which differentiates his speech from that of Mrs Cheveley. Lord Goring is a dandy and, as such, he has replaced his moral code with an aesthetic one, but when he gives advice to his friends, the Chilterns, he sounds

extremely solemn. On such occasions, Lord Goring seems to follow the same strict moral code of Victorian society, the very code he is so willing to mock.

Lord Goring was once engaged to Mrs Cheveley and rejected her after catching her in an embarrassing situation with another man. Although Lord Goring‘s morality code is not so strict, he did not accept being betrayed and rejected Mrs Cheveley for such immoral behaviour. Mrs Cheveley‘s justification for her behaviour is not accepted by Lord Goring:

> MRS CHEVELEY: And you threw me over because you saw, or said you saw, poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me in the conservatory at Tenby. […] Why, Lord Mortlake was never anything more to me than an amusement. One of those utterly tedious amusements one only finds at an English country house on an English country Sunday. I don't think any one at all morally responsible for what he or she does at an English country house.
> LORD GORING: Yes. I know lots of people think that (WILDE, 2003, p. 563-4).

Mrs Cheveley worsens her situation, for she ranks fun at a higher level than morality when she affirms that Lord Mortlake was an amusement to her. Furthermore, she demonstrates that, for her, morality is relative, and should not apply to situations where boredom prevails. Lord Goring, as amoral as he is, does not accept her excuses and argues that a lot of people think that, which implies that he is not amongst them.

Even though throughout the play Lord Goring makes some serious statements regarding morality and is not completely wicked like the dandies in Wilde‘s previous comedies, when he advises Lady Chiltern to forgive her husband‘s faults, he seems to contradict his principles and convictions:

> LORD GORING: Well, I will make her stand by her husband. That is the only thing for her to do. That is the only thing for any woman to do. It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution (WILDE, 2003, p. 555).

What Lord Goring is saying is that morality should not be ranked higher than love, for morality can only destroy marriages, whereas love is able to save them. It is quite curious that the ‗good guy‘ in the play would adopt such a position. However, he has not left his values aside, merely ranked them in an order of importance that privileges matrimony rather than morals. The institutions of marriage and the family are for Lord Goring of greater significance than morality. That is the reason why he thinks Lady Gertrude should support her husband even if she has found out that he lacks morality.

Mrs Cheveley, in her turn, incorporates the wicked dandy throughout the play. She is not a mere antagonist; she is the villain, whose deeds are intended to damage the protagonist of the play, the so-called _ideal husband‘, Sir Robert Chiltern. As curious as it may seem, Wilde‘s description of Mrs Cheveley is focused only on her physical appearance, and her psychological aspects are left aside. Mrs Cheveley‘s psychological characterisation is to be given according to her attitudes. Throughout the play, Mrs Cheveley proves to be not only deceitful, but also selfish. All her actions are in benefit of herself. In spite of her bad behaviour, she is an entertaining character, due to her speech marked by the use of epigrams and paradoxes. Even when she is blackmailing Sir Robert, she is witty and cunning:

> MRS CHEVELEY: [...] My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. Everybody has nowadays. The drawback is that most people are so dreadfully expensive. I know I am. I hope you will be more reasonable in your terms (WILDE, 2003, p. 527).

Mrs Cheveley‘s intentions are clear from the beginning of the play, when she tries to coerce Sir Robert Chiltern into supporting her in exchange for the compromising letter she has in her possession. Mrs Cheveley is similar to the dandies Wilde had created in his previous plays, for she is cruel and vindictive. Her main characteristic is being immoral, wicked and ironic:

> MRS CHEVELEY: Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues – and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins – one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man – now they crush him (WILDE, 2003, p. 528).

As Mrs Cheveley states that customs and morals have become stricter so that scandals can now destroy a person‘s career, she is not only using this argument to blackmail Sir Robert Chiltern, but she is also pointing out that the Victorian moral code is made to devastate English citizens, who do not always fit the category. The irony is in the way she deplores how this new code of behaviour does not allow scandals to lend charm or interest to the corrupted person.

In fact, Mrs Cheveley‘s moral code is quite different from that of Victorian society:

> MRS CHEVELEY: Do you know, Gertrude, I don‘t mind your talking morality a bit. Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. You dislike me. I am quite aware of that. And I have always detested you (WILDE, 2003, p. 551).

When Mrs Cheveley defines morality in terms of fondness, she is implicitly saying that Victorian morality is only useful as a mechanism for the destruction of one‘s enemies. She scorns Victorian principles to the point that they become an instrument of revenge in her hands. She expects that the strict Victorian moral code will destroy Sir Robert Chiltern‘s career for her if he does not agree to her terms. Her only task would be the disclosure of his past secret, and the system would do the rest.

In fact, Mrs Cheveley‘s sharp irony is Wilde‘s means of deploring the hypocrisy of Victorian society. Mrs Cheveley‘s lines in *An Ideal Husband* are always mocking in tone, which delights and criticises simultaneously. Nonetheless, it is not Mrs Cheveley‘s lack of morality or her denunciation of Victorian society‘s hypocrisy that makes her a dandy. The most important characteristic of the Wildean dandy is his/her aesthetic discourse, and Mrs Cheveley is depicted as a truly Wildean dandy:

> LORD GORING: Pray have a cigarette. Half the pretty women in London smoke cigarettes. Personally I prefer the other half.
> MRS CHEVELEY: Thanks. I never smoke. My dressmaker wouldn't like it, and a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn't it? What the second duty is, no one has as yet discovered (WILDE, 2003, p. 563).

When Mrs Cheveley asserts that a woman‘s first duty in life is to her dressmaker, she is obviously including herself in the category, and telling Lord Goring that being well-dressed and having a carefully thought-out appearance is her primary concern in life. As a dandy, Mrs Cheveley has her own conception of beauty, which is translated in her appearance. A remarkable point regarding Mrs Cheveley‘s statements about her first and second duty in life is that they were taken from Wilde‘s publication ‗Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young‘ in the December issue of the student magazine *The Chameleon* in 1894. Indeed, the very first phrase and philosophy Wilde wrote in this text is that ‗The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1244). By reshaping his statement and adding it to the discourse of one of his characters, Wilde creates a parallel between his own discourse and that of Mrs Cheveley, revealing clearly that his characters work as mouthpieces for his own thoughts.

The parallel created by Wilde indicates that Mrs Cheveley is undeniably being as artificial as possible when she claims that her first duty in life is to her dressmaker, for she is treating appearance as the most important thing in life. Actually, the philosophy of the artificial is one of Wilde‘s most re-stated concepts throughout his

plays. Wilde conceived it through the game between the serious and the trivial, which appears in his very first tragedy, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, in the division between the serious Nihilists and the trivial characters from the court, and was systematically reworked in all Wilde‘s comedies. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the game between serious and trivial is stated by the dandy Lord Darlington. In *A Woman of No Importance* it is the dandy Lord Illingworth who mentions the philosophy of the superficial. In *An Ideal Husband* both the dandies Lord Goring and Miss Mabel Chiltern refer to seriousness and triviality in their dialogue. Finally, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is the dandy Algernon Moncrieff who makes inversions between serious and trivial. The philosophy of the superficial is carried predominantly in the dandies‘ discourse, for the dandies are the only characters who value triviality. In the dandies‘ conception, what society considers trivial is their display of a deeper comprehension of beauty and its effects.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde created the largest number of dandies in any one comedy, since, in it, there are four of them: Algernon Moncrieff, Cecily Cardew, Gwendolen Fairfax and Lady Bracknell. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, John Ernest Worthing, the main character, whose name is referred to in the title of the play, is the only possible exception, for he is far too serious to be considered an original dandy. Algernon, as the real dandy, outshines John and is sometimes mistaken as the central character.

Algernon is the greatest trivial protagonist, which frees him to behave in the most amusing manner. His discourse presents dandiacal features, and is filled with witticisms, epigrams, irony and paradoxes. When John tells Algernon that he intends to ‗kill‘ his fake brother Ernest if Gwendolen accepts marrying him, Algernon tries to convince John not to do such a thing:

> ALGERNON: […] You don‘t seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.
> JACK [*sententiously*]: That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.
> ALGERNON: Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time.
> JACK: For heaven‘s sake, don‘t try to be cynical. It‘s perfectly easy to be cynical.
> ALGERNON: My dear fellow, it isn‘t easy to be anything nowadays. There‘s such a lot of beastly competition about (WILDE, 1994, p. 14).

As Algernon inverts the saying ‗Two is company, but three is a crowd' and adds that English couples have proved him right, he teases the audience. His choice of words ‗happy English home' is quite mocking, for it scorns marriage, which was one of the Victorian standards at the time of the première of the play. Nonetheless, Algernon's sardonic comments are made in such a hilarious tone that he provokes laughter and delights the audience.

It is significant that the dandy has his own set of values, with which he replaces those of Victorian society. One of the dandy's values is Hedonism, which consists of the doctrine that advocates the pursuit of pleasure as a matter of principle. The traditional understanding of hedonist theory, that pleasure is the primary intrinsic good, appears on more than one occasion in Wilde's comedies. This philosophy is echoed when the hedonistic characteristic of the dandy is seen in John's speech about pleasure: ‗ALGERNON: How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town? / JACK: Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?' (WILDE, 1994, p. 8). John Worthing believes that pleasure is what moves people, and therefore, it is the only reason why people act. Nonetheless, when he tells Algernon that he has come to London specially to propose to Miss Gwendolen Fairfax, Algernon tells him that he should have said that he has come to London for business, since marriage in Algernon's opinion is not a pleasure. Obviously, John and Algernon have different concepts of pleasure, and both of them seek it in their own way. Peter Raby in his *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Reader's Companion* (1995) refers to John Worthing's speech:

> [i]n *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde created a world in which all the characters, with one possible exception, are dandies, living, or seeking to live, entirely of pleasure. [...] The alternative is to adopt, as guardian, a high moral tone, and a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness. Algernon, in pursuit of the same aims, has invented Bunbury and warns Jack that if he ever gets married, he will be very glad to know Bunbury: ―A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it". To be Ernest, to know Bunbury, is to construct a life of pleasure, which is at the same time a deception, or at least a fiction, an act of imagination (p. 34-36).

For Raby, being a hedonist, that is, seeking out pleasure, includes every action the characters accomplish in order to enjoy themselves. In fact, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, adopting a fake identity and *being Ernest* is the result of the hedonist philosophy advocated by Wilde, for when John adopts the identity of his fake brother Ernest, he does that to have some sort of pleasure. Algernon, in his turn, also seeks

pleasure when he escapes from his boring social obligations and claims he is going to visit his fake invalid friend, Bunbury.

Cecily Cardew is the ideal romantic partner for Algernon, as she is smart, witty and given to make amusing comments. She is also fascinated by wickedness, which makes her even more perfect for Algernon, who is fairly amoral. She has a self-awareness that cannot be seen in other characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

> ALGERNON: You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.
> CECILY: Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.
> ALGERNON: They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.
> CECILY: Oh, I don‘t think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn‘t know what to talk to him about (WILDE, 1994, p. 33).

A reasonable man does not meet Cecily‘s expectations, for she has invented a long-lasting romance between herself and John Worthing‘s fake brother, Ernest. Her imaginary romance is based on the idealistic view she has of wickedness, and she is willing to make it real. Thus, Algernon, though he looks common like everyone else, plays an essential role in making her dreams come true. This is the reason why, at the end of the play, Cecily is happy to marry a man whose name is not Ernest. She is marrying a wicked man, which is far more important.

Gwendolen Fairfax is another dandy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: she is cunning, manipulative and spoiled, and her main preoccupation is with appearances. Because of that, her dream is to marry a man whose name is Ernest, for this name has the perfect appearance of honesty:

> GWENDOLEN: Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing‘s. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.
> CECILY: I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity (WILDE, 1994, p. 55).

Gwendolen‘s choice of words, ‗that *seems* to me‘, is revealing, for it indicates she is much more concerned with exterior manifestations than with reality. Furthermore, she is conceited, and when she states ‗I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 46), she reveals that she considers her own life amazing, and, thus, worthy of being recorded in a diary.

When John Worthing discovers that Gwendolen‘s dream is to get married to a man whose name is Ernest, he seems to be really worried about it and questions Gwendolen if she could love him if he had another name:

> JACK: But you don‘t really mean to say that you couldn‘t love me if my name wasn‘t Ernest?
> GWENDOLEN: But your name is Ernest.
> JACK: Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn‘t love me then?
> GWENDOLEN [*Glibly.*]: Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them. (WILDE, 1994, p. 18)

Gwendolen‘s comment sounds similar to Walter Pater‘s remark on metaphysical questions, for he says that the speculative reasoning about the concept of beauty consists of ‗metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere‘ (2009, p. ix). Although Gwendolen‘s answer does not refer to the concept of beauty, as Pater‘s observation does, her statement presents the same degree of disregard towards supposition.

Finally, there is Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen‘s mother, who is the dandy antagonist. She is the obstacle to both her daughter‘s and her nephew‘s romances. Lady Bracknell is witty, sharp and ironic, and her tone is always serious, which makes her statements even more hilarious, as they mock Victorian values. She is primarily concerned with money, and the barrier she had created for Algernon and Cecily, disappears as soon as she realises Cecily is heiress to a fortune:

> LADY BRACKNELL: […] Kindly turn round, sweet child. [Cecily *turns completely round.*] No, the side view is what I want. [Cecily *presents her profile.*] Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present. Algernon!
> ALGERNON: Yes, Aunt Augusta!
> LADY BRACKNELL: There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew‘s profile.
> ALGERNON: Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don‘t care twopence about social possibilities.
> LADY BRACKNELL: Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can‘t get into it do that (WILDE, 1994, p. 59).

Lady Bracknell‘s perception of distinct social possibilities in Cecily‘s profile is extremely ironic. It is relatively explicit that these social possibilities are going to be clearly defined by the fact that Cecily is able to buy for herself new dresses and a new hairstyle, for her ‗dress is sadly simple‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 58), and her hair ‗seems almost as Nature might have left it‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 58). Nonetheless, that can all soon be altered, since a ‗thoroughly experienced French maid produces a really

marvellous result in a very brief space of time‘ (WILDE, 1994, p. 58-59). It is implicit in Lady Bracknell‘s discourse that Cecily‘s money can also buy her a reputation in high society. Once more, Wilde is making sarcastic comments about the values on which Victorian society is really based, for Lady Bracknell‘s assessment of Cecily totally changes after she discovers Cecily‘s wealth.

Wilde‘s dandies are, as has been observed, the most important aspect of his transposition of theory into practice. The dandy is a character who, in essence, is aesthetically conceived. As far as the definitions of the dandy go, he/she is primarily concerned with beauty in terms of exterior appearance. The preoccupation of the dandy with dressing elegantly reveals an aesthetic care, and governs his/her way of being entirely. Nonetheless, Wilde adds his personal touches to the figure of the dandy, enabling the male character to have a feminine counterpart. Furthermore, Wilde inserts some of his own personal characteristics into the dandy, so much so that some critics see the dandy as Wilde‘s theatrical representation. The Wildean dandy is ironic, witty and sharp, which affords different perspectives of analysis, such as aesthetic and social criticism, to be concentrated on his/her figure. Being sarcastic, the dandy is able to entertain and criticise simultaneously. Moreover, the dandy‘s discourse is filled with figures of speech, enriching his/her way of talking in terms of linguistic content, which provides more elements to be worthy of analysis. Bearing such varied traits, the dandy may be seen as the epitome of Wilde‘s aesthetic theories, the most Wildean of all elements in his transposition of aestheticism into theatre.

6. Conclusion

The present study has used the aesthetic conception of art in order to analyse Oscar Wilde‘s plays in the light of his own aesthetic theory, as set out in his theoretical-critical essays, ‗The Critic as Artist‘, ‗The Decay of Lying‘, ‗Pen, Pencil and Poison‘ and ‗The Truth of Masks‘, all of them collected in *Intentions* (1891). The initial objective of the research was to understand the extent to which Wilde‘s aesthetic theory underpins his own dramatic practice.

However, it soon became clear that it is not possible to define one single Wildean aesthetic theory. Wilde is said to have a debt to Romantic as well as Symbolist writers. His works are also considered to be representative of the Fin de Siècle period. Since Wilde‘s death, his works have been gradually reappraised and seen as an appropriate source for diverse lines of analysis. Wilde has been seen as a Modernist, for he was a pioneer in using intertextuality, even before the concept was created by Julia Kristeva in 1966. His writings are a mosaic of ideas borrowed from various writers and philosophers. Nevertheless, the most important point is that, whatever sources Wilde utilises, he transforms them so that the borrowed ideas acquire Wildean characteristics.

From early on in the present study, it has been recognised that, although different concepts converge in Wilde‘s voice, he cannot be said to have developed a single theory. Even though Wilde appropriates existing ideas and makes them his own, his aestheticism must be understood to be a number of aesthetic *theories*, for the basis of his aesthetic writings lies in multiple aesthetics rather than in a single concept.

The critical and theoretical foundation of Wilde‘s theories dates back to the coining of the word ‗Aesthetica‘ by Alexander Baumgarten in 1750. Wilde‘s perceptions were also altered by his reading of the works of his immediate precursors, Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Henry Newman and John Stuart Mill, as well as other more distant predecessors, such as Teophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert and Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, and the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel.

It is probable that Gautier‘s legacy was indirectly assimilated through Wilde‘s readings of Flaubert, Baudelaire and Pater, from which Wilde absorbed many of the concepts which Gautier first introduced in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), in particular that of the separation of morals and manners in works of art. Similarly,

Wilde‘s reading of the philosophers Kant and Hegel gave him indirect contact with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Earl of Shaftesbury.

Each of these authors and philosophers contributed to the changes that aesthetics underwent prior to the definitive rupture with the concept of ethics. The division between the two found its most eloquent expression in Wilde‘s works. But Wilde may by no means be considered the founder of the Aesthetic Movement, for Walter Pater, his mentor, formulated the movement‘s key ideas, which Wilde went on to develop and modify. His major legacy as an aesthete was the division between aesthetics and ethics.

The Aesthetic Movement was rather an association of ideas than an artistic school as such. Although the movement had no manifesto, in _The Decay of Lying‘, Wilde sets out its four most important doctrines: _Art never expresses anything but itself‘; _All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals‘; _Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life‘; and _Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art‘ (WILDE, 2003, p.1091-2). Wilde argued that art should not be judged by didactic, utilitarian or moral criteria, since it should be valued on its own terms. Art‘s value is related to beauty and aesthetic fruition, which Wilde described as _temperament‘.

In _The Critic as Artist‘, Wilde relates artistic beauty to style, which in turn is related to the truth the artist is able to achieve in his work. Truth, in its turn, is associated with the individual and is seen as subjective. Therefore, beauty is also subjective. Wilde avoids defining _beauty‘, and, by doing so, he also leaves it unrestrained. This contributes to the idea that Wilde did not hold a single aesthetic theory, but multiple ones. His aesthetics are as numerous as the ways beauty can be defined.

With regard to the analysis of Wilde‘s plays, it was found that, in terms of theatrical components, Wilde once again combines more traditional elements with innovative ones, adding his own imaginative touch to conventions. In his choice of characters, for example, it was seen that, although many of them may be classified according to types, such as the woman with a past, the puritan and the villain, Wilde innovates by introducing a character found in Italian decadence and French symbolism, the dandy. As with all his source material, Wilde gave the dandy new features, very peculiar ones, and transformed him/her into a character whose speech is characterised by witticisms and whose poise and sense of beauty surpass his/her other characteristics. In Wilde‘s comedies, most of the characters can be considered dandies, and in his

tragedies there is always (a possible exception being *Salomé*) at least one character who has some dandiacal traits.

Another Wildean innovation, especially evident in *An Ideal Husband*, is the long stage directions giving physical and psychological descriptions of the characters. In most of the other plays the stage directions are very succinct, however. In the case of these plays, characters are described by other characters, which often reveals more about the characters themselves than those they are referring to. It is significant that Wilde‘s characters are either from the aristocracy or connected to the aristocracy. Wilde was clearly seeking to depict this stratum of society in such a way as to expose positive and negative aspects of it.

With regard to his plots, in the tragedies, Wilde works with remote time and space. All the tragedies deal with stories of impossible love, which gives them a melodramatic tone, negatively viewed by most critics. Nonetheless, the exaggerated plots were a means by which Wilde showed his aesthetic leaning. It is worth recalling that Wilde states in _The Decay of Lying‘, that _the object of Art is not simple truth but complex beauty. [...] Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of overemphasis‘ (WILDE, 2003, p. 1079). Wilde considered artificiality to be a stylistic feature, which leads one to the conclusion that the histrionic endings of his three tragedies were certainly not accidental.

The plots of the comedies, on the other hand, are all set in contemporary scenarios, that is, in London in Victorian period. Through his use of recognisable settings, Wilde is able to subvert Victorian values, for he manipulates the plot so as to make the audience empathise with those characters who deviate from conventional behaviour. In so doing, Wilde highlights not only Victorian hypocrisy and double standards, but also the problem created when a set of strict rules is established. Wilde shows that no set of rules is broad enough to include everyone in society, which transforms rules into restrictions that may allow or veto the participation of a person inside specific circles. Nonetheless, subversive though Wilde was, he showed in his plays that anyone who can negotiate the rules can dominate society and thereby achieve freedom.

Wilde gives more detailed descriptions of the settings for his plays in the comedies, than in the tragedies. He was clearly aware of the effects he intended to cause in the audience by means of his choice of settings and lighting. In *An Ideal Husband*,

for instance, there is a long description of the Chilterns‘ room, where a tapestry entitled ‗The Triumph of Love‘ is hung, in a clear sign that denouement of the play is going to be positive, which is indeed what happens, for, at the end, the main couple is reconciled. Wilde‘s choice of scenario was intended to produce effect and meaning, and his concern was primarily aesthetic.

Wilde‘s stage directions can also be seen as an artifice through which he was capable of controlling every single aspect of his plays, from its writing to its staging, so that he ensures that the effects he had in mind would be applied in performance. His preoccupation with detail reveals an author who is consistent with his own precept that ‗[d]etails are of no importance in life, but in art details are vital‘ (qtd in RABY, 1988, p. 83). Wilde‘s concern comes from his aesthetic belief that the artist should choose the most appropriate form in order to produce the most beautiful effect.

The most salient aspect of Wilde‘s dramaturgy is his mastery of linguistic skills, particularly in his brilliant, witty dialogues, rich in analytic-interpretive layers. Wilde‘s dialogue is considered by many critics to be his primary strength, rich as it is in figures of speech and thought as well as literary devices. It is the dialogue that sustains the plot, distinguishes the characters and sustains the social criticism in the subtext. Wilde‘s dialogue connects theatrical components to linguistic ones, above all because, in theatre, language *is* action.

One of the most typical linguistic devices used by Wilde in his plays is the opposition between triviality and seriousness. Wilde juxtaposes these two contradictory notions, causing audiences to question their certainties, showing them that strict categories can be exchangeable. The interplay between trivial and serious pervades Wilde‘s dramatic works as a whole, from his first tragedy, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, to his last comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, proving that inversion is one of his most recurrent techniques.

However, some of Wilde‘s techniques are restricted to a single play. Such is the case of the use of metaphor in *Salomé*, in which Wilde draws a parallel between the moon and the title character, Salomé, so that the characters‘ varied views of the moon reflect their diverse readings of Salomé‘s personality. After *Salomé*, Wilde no longer used metaphorical resources, with the result that his last tragedy is the most symbolic of all his plays. *Salomé* is also atypical as it is the only one of the plays in which the figure of the dandy is not evoked.

The language of most of Wilde‘s characters, above all the dandy, is characterised by the use of figures of speech, such as irony, oxymorons and paradoxes. The dialogue is also enriched by stylistic devices, such as witticisms, puns and epigrams. Through the use of these linguistic tools, Wilde establishes a resource which sustains aesthetic and social criticism alike. It has been pointed out that there are some characters who only resemble the dandy, for their discourse is void of aesthetic concerns. These characters also utilise figures of speech, but these are aimed at social rather than aesthetic criticism. The true dandies are the only characters who voice Wilde‘s own aesthetic perceptions. Through their actions they are able to subvert traditional values and convince conventional characters that their aesthetic values should be followed.

In the analysis of Wilde‘s transposition of theory into practice, it was evident that Wilde‘s Aestheticism resonates throughout his plays, with clearly discernible echoes of such questions as non-utilitarianism in art, contradiction, hedonism, and the separation between aesthetics and ethics all being heard. These questions are most clearly embodied in the persona of the dandy. Wilde gives his dandies a special kind of emphasis, for they play the dual role of aesthetic philosopher and social critic of the hypocrisy of Victorian society.

Wilde employs various techniques to achieve the interchange between his aesthetic concepts and his theatrical works. One of the most common of them is intertextuality. The three principal forms of intertextuality employed by Wilde are allusion, paraphrase and plagiarism.

In allusion, the referenced fact is not directly stated, but is suggested by its secondary or metaphorical characteristics. This is the case in Wilde‘s use of melodrama, which is identified with his statements about art being artificial in the sense that it is opposed to nature, for art is a work produced under the influence of self-conscious culture. When Wilde employs paraphrase, he recreates an existing text, in order that readers may ‗recall‘ the original message. A recurrent example is the situations in which characters echo Gilbert, from ‗The Critic as Artist‘, the mouthpiece for Wilde‘s own aesthetic concepts.

The most controversial form of intertextuality utilised by Wilde was plagiarism. His contemporaries accused him of plagiarising the works of various writers. However, one must remember that the concept of intertextuality had not yet been developed. Wilde‘s use of allusion and paraphrase was therefore sometimes seen as plagiarism. In

the present study it has been considered that plagiarism, the unauthorised and unlicensed copying or modification of an artistic, scientific or literary work, is a resource Wilde employed to quote himself. Obviously, Wilde did not need license to reuse his statements. He restated some of his brightest lines as if they were too precious to be used only once. Actually, Wilde used to extract an entire statement from a character in one play and reproduce it in another, and he also used to transpose text from his theoretical essays to his dramatic texts. In this way, perhaps more clearly than in any other, it can be seen how, for Wilde, his theory and his dramatic practice are one and the same voice. His plays are permeated not only with the ideas he outlined in his theoretical essays but also, in some cases, with the very same words.

In summary, Wilde presents a coherent posture as an aesthetic critic, for his theoretical concepts pervade all his dramatic works. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that Wilde argues in _The Critic as Artist‘ that a work of criticism may be as creative as the work of art itself, and, by adding his aesthetic theories to his plays, Wilde is creating both critical works of art and artistic works of criticism. By merging theory into practice, he is also bringing practice to theory, as he does when he chooses the dialogue form for his aesthetic essays _The Critic as Artist‘ and _The Decay of Lying‘. In uniting aesthetic theories and drama into single entities, Oscar Wilde subverted conventional practices, which enabled him to be considered the most avant-garde Victorian thinker.

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